

Fall 2014

## The Caring Beliefs and Practices of Effective Teachers

Barbara D. McCollum

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# THE CARING BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

by

BARBARA DAY MCCOLLUM

(Under the Direction of Dan Rea)

## ABSTRACT

Current educational reform tends to emphasize an impersonal test-driven approach to teaching while the present research maintains this reform is inequitable because it neglects the personal component of teacher caring, which is necessary to reach all students, especially disaffected underachievers. The purpose of the present multi-case study was to determine the caring beliefs and practices of six effective teachers in two Title I Elementary schools in a central Georgia school system, how these beliefs and practices manifested in the classroom, and in what ways the teachers' beliefs and practices may have been influenced by their own cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and those of their students. Using semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, the researcher explored individual and common beliefs and practices of the effective teachers concerning their students' academic and personal achievements.

The researcher found these teachers believed and demonstrated the need to support intellectual, social, and moral growth as a component of caring for students, especially underachieving students. They believed caring relationships focusing on the full human growth of students were necessary and effective for student academic achievement. They believed all students could learn and be successful in school and life. The teachers valued the uniqueness of each child and supported individual student instruction and growth. Personal backgrounds of the teachers impacted their own beliefs and practices about how to be effective teachers of children. The cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the teachers' students sometimes impacted how

the teachers taught their students but did not affect how they cared for their students. The teachers defined student achievement for “at-risk” learners as self-improvement based on personal goals set with teachers’ assistance, and therefore, their ideas of achievement goals were not always consistent with mandatory curriculum standards and benchmarks.

The voices of effective caring teachers may provide the missing personal link to current impersonal approaches to educational reform that fail to help low-achieving students. The present study supports inclusive and equitable educational reform by acknowledging the personal contributions of effective caring teachers in fostering the achievement of all students especially, disaffected underachievers.

**INDEX WORDS:** Achievement, Achievement gap, Affective domain, “At-risk,” Caring, Culture, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), Effective teachers, English Learners (ELs), Equitable educational reform

THE CARING BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

by

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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THE CARING BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

by

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Fall 2014

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my dad, Robert L. Day, Jr., my very first caring teacher. He left this earth before I started this program but he is the reason why I was able to persevere, work hard, stay determined and believe in my abilities. This dissertation is also dedicated to all the caring teachers that I had as a student or that I have worked with over the last three decades. Truly, the relationships that were started by these teachers created a ripple effect that brought me to the place I am today. I am especially grateful for the caring teachers who participated in this study and took the time to share their students' beautiful stories of achievement with me.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Each year in classrooms across the United States, struggling students are considered “at-risk” because of educational disadvantages that cause them to fail to learn in school. Many of these students are subjected to memorizing facts and testing of skills and content with little or no interaction with the teacher or other students (Plitt, 2004). Teachers in these classrooms focus on end of year assessments and treat their students with an impersonal “one size fits all” approach that is standardized for everyone (Saracino, 2010). On the other hand, there are other low-achieving students in classroom communities where they feel individually valued and supported. In these classrooms, teachers take time to develop meaningful relationships and show that they care about the personal as well as the academic needs of their students (Malikow, 2006). Educators need to better understand these contrasting approaches to teaching our struggling students. Current reform tends to emphasize uniform standards and an impersonal test-driven approach to teaching while the present research maintains this impersonal approach to educational reform is inequitable because it neglects the vital components of teacher caring, which is necessary to reach all students especially disaffected underachieving students. Ironically, impersonal educational reform is designed to help disaffected underachieving students but it often fails to reach these students because it lacks the essential element of teacher caring (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Lanphar, 2011; Thompson, 2010). For more equitable educational reform, there is a need to investigate further a caring student-centered approach to teaching as a more effective alternative to current impersonal reform.

Understanding how to improve student achievement, especially for struggling students, can be a complex and daunting task. Current educational reform stresses strict accountability, prescribed curriculum, scripted teaching practices, tracked progress, and mandated tests (Christensen & Karp, 2003). This strict approach to reform presses teachers to treat students with an impersonal approach standardized for everyone. Given the pressure to perform according to rigid standards, teachers often narrow the curriculum and teach to the mandated tests (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003). This narrow focus on test results leads many teachers to attend primarily to the cognitive demands of student achievement and leaves them little time to develop caring relationships with their students.

According to the present study, the unheard voice of effective teachers concerning their caring beliefs and practices is a vitally important missing piece of current educational reform. Consistent with this view, Prillaman, Eaker, and Kendrick in *The Tapestry of Caring* (1994) stated:

Current notions of reform promote an increased, measurable accountability, which essentially excludes the “something else” that practitioners of education believe to be essential. It is this something else, what we are calling the *language of the expressive*, which practitioners indicate is left out of the discourse about effective teaching... This conversation, composed of the language of the expressive, emphasizes relationships among people within the educational context. (p. 5)

According to Prillaman, Eaker, and Kendrick, the *language of the technical*—which emphasizes measured accountability and the technical aspects of teacher effectiveness—has excluded the equally essential *language of the expressive* that emphasizes caring relationships between

teachers and students. The present study gives voice to effective teachers' unheard language of expressiveness and allows them to share the caring beliefs and practices that contributed to their student successes.

Only minimal attention has been given to the success stories of caring teachers who rallied behind their "at-risk" students and forged relationships that made a difference in their students' lives. Studies have confirmed investigations about the caring characteristics of teachers and schools that successfully motivated and engaged youth, including those labeled "high performing, high poverty schools" (Baldwin, 2001; Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & BenAvie, 1996; Diero, 1996; James, Jurich, & Estes, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Meier, 1995; Resnick et al., 1997; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ousten, & Smith, 1979; Sergiovanni, 1996, 2000).

Current reform emphasizes impersonal test-driven educational policies and practices. This one-sided emphasis on the cognitive demands of teaching and learning neglects and undermines the affective need of teachers and students to develop a caring relationship (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Noddings, 2002). Many effective teachers of underachieving students use a balanced approach that supports both the cognitive demands and affective needs of student learning (Buese, 2005; Marzano, 1992). If students know that the teacher personally cares about them, then they are more likely to care about learning what the teacher is teaching them.

Specifically, the present study used a short survey to identify six "effective teachers" nominated by their colleagues in two Title I elementary schools in central Georgia. The Georgia Department of Education has recognized both schools as Distinguished Schools for achieving adequate yearly progress (AYP) for seven years. A multi-case study method with semi-structured

interviews and classroom observations was used to explore the caring beliefs and practices of the six effective teachers.

### **Background of the Study**

For the purposes of investigating teachers and students involving achievement, one can take a historical look back to the last decade. In 2002, No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2003) required that individual states set standards for student performance and teacher quality as well as take responsibility for results and improvement. In 2004, Georgia phased in the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) for all subjects and grades, which mandated clear expectations for instruction, student work and assessment. President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (AARA) in 2009, which provided Race to the Top (RT3) money for states desiring intensive support and effective interventions to help with closing the achievement gap and bringing American children to an equal place of academic excellence within a global market. RT3 has required Georgia school systems to focus on data and assessments of teachers and students to turn around the lowest-performing schools. In 2012, Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS) placed further emphasis on knowledge and skills needed for success in college and work. Understandably, teachers feel obligated to focus their attention on the cognitive demands placed on their students and especially their lowest-achieving students because of the value placed on the consequences of assessment results by local, state, and federal officials.

After a decade of NCLB (NCLB, 2003), distinguished by a standards-based curriculum with learning assessments based on annual test scores, national progress has been minimal. Sobering statistics show that the achievement gap continues to exist. For example, special

analyses by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2009 and 2011 showed that Black and Hispanic students trailed their White peers by an average of more than 20 test-score points on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math and reading assessments at 4th and 8th grades, a difference of about two grade levels. These gaps persisted even though the score differentials between Black and White students narrowed between 1992 and 2007 in 4th grade math and reading and 8th grade math (NCES, 2009, 2011). We need to understand better why government initiatives—handed down to teachers by legislators—have not worked for so many students. We need to explore the viability of different alternatives to the current reform efforts.

Just prior to NCLB initiatives, an analysis of 1996 data by the National Assessment of Educational Progress noted in research studies about schools that displayed high rates of student success, “quality teaching” was the most powerful influence on academic achievement (Wenglinsky, 2000). Another study of successful schools stated, “The only path to greater academic achievement that is open to all students is the one they and teachers travel daily together” (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 119).

In contrast to policy makers, there is little debate among educational researchers about how effective teachers are crucial for supporting student learning and success in school. Yet the question still remains of how effective teachers help to improve student learning. Although the process of learning takes place in an instructional environment, it still requires a high degree of interpersonal connection between the teacher and learner working together (Goldstein, 1999). Understanding how effective teachers approach the affective needs of their underachieving students is of vital importance to understanding learning within the context of a classroom and could have critical implications for closing achievement gaps.

The affective characteristics of effective teachers have promoted the theory of caring as a framework for examining the achievement of “at-risk” students (Alder, 2002; Camak, 2007; Davis, 2008). In the present study, “quality teaching” includes not only effective teaching strategies, well-designed curricula, and adequate preparation but also caring relationships. Quality or effective teaching is more than a stimulus for independent cognitive learning. It is a facilitator of motivated learning that takes place within the context of a caring relationship. This study went beyond the cognitive dimensions and explored the affective dimensions found in relationships that caring teachers and students travel together each day on the pathway to success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Nel Noddings (1984, 1988, 1995, 2006, 2010) has extensively researched and written about the ethic of care providing the first theoretical framework for this study. Noddings (1984) clearly asserts that the first aim of education is the caring process. In her first major work, *Caring*, she stated that caring should be the basis for ethical decision-making and students placed at risk need challenging, caring educational environments to successfully engage in the learning process. As a prominent caring theorist, Noddings (1992) proposed that educators need to value an ethos of caring and be concerned when the curriculum and school are not actively promoting a search for connection between the teacher and the student. She further stated that interpersonal connections of relationships have profound consequences on how students’ identities develop along with how their academic success is determined.

According to Noddings (1984), caring is a universal need and human encounters or affective responses are a basic way of human life. There is clearly a person acting as a “carer”

and another person acting as the “cared for.” Additionally, Noddings (1984) states that classroom teachers must use caring as a “lens through which all practices and possible practices [with students] are examined” (pp. 172-173). Noddings’ definition of caring is best looked at through relationships. Noddings (1992) defined a caring relation as “a connection or encounter between two human beings” (p. 15). In this relation, each party must contribute something or else the connection is broken and caring does not occur.

Noddings (1984, 1988, 1995, 2006) studied how teachers may implement care in the classroom as a way to better understand care in a classroom context. Noddings (1988) provides a plan for how to put into action an ethic of care by using four components of caring: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. She further explains that modeling, practice, dialogue and confirmation are practices through which teachers can engage in caring relationships with their students.

Caring is a universal need that may be expressed somewhat differently according to cultural differences (Noddings, 2010). It is important from a curriculum studies perspective to investigate how cultural differences may influence the specific meaning and practice of universal beliefs about caring. The educational achievement gap between students of color and Whites, urban and suburban students, as well as between low and high socioeconomic students, remains a reality nationwide (Harris & Herrington, 2006; Holland, 2007, Von Secker, 2004; Willie, 2001). In addition, other achievement gaps, such as those based on sex, English-language proficiency and learning disabilities have been included in the last decade to make it an even more complex issue. Many of these achievement gap groups can be used to describe a majority of Georgia’s student population who piloted the RT3 initiative as well as numerous schools across the United States (GA DOE, 2010).



According to Gay (2000), the development of a caring relationship between teachers and students that is sensitive to students' cultural backgrounds is an essential part of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Noddings' caring theory is often times an underlying theme of CRT. Gay devoted an entire chapter on the power of caring in her book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*. She felt that caring interpersonal relationships are characterized by patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment for the participants.

Culturally responsive teachers cultivate their abilities to combine the ethic of care and elements of culture to create effective learning environments, which makes learning more meaningful and therefore more comprehensible (Pang, Stein, Gomez, Matas, & Shimogori, 2011). When this caring relationship is weak, students, especially students of color, are less responsive to learning. Closing the culturally responsive "caring gap" is a prerequisite to closing the achievement gap.

### **Description of Study**

The present study focused primarily on the teachers' perspectives of caring relationships with students and how these relationships affected learning. Noddings' four components of care were used as a basis to operationalize the collection of data. The data collection technique was semi-structured interviews with teachers who were nominated as effective teachers by their colleagues. Identifying effective teachers through nominations was based on the idea that staff members and teachers are in the best position to designate effective teachers in their school. The nomination surveys (see Appendix A) were worded to support the goal of the nominated teachers meeting the criteria of teachers described in the literature as influential in supporting positive student learning and overall student success. The qualitative nature of this study allowed the

teachers' narratives to address each of the research questions. The teachers' responses to the interview questions allowed the researcher to focus on the teachers' viewpoints about interactions with their students. Special attention was given to relations with underachieving students who were considered "at-risk" because of educational disadvantages such as ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds.

Teacher interviews were supplemented by classroom observations. The observations allowed the researcher to observe how teachers exhibited caring practices and also how students responded to these practices. Another important reason for observation of the classes was to look at the non-instructional actions among the teachers and students that cannot be explained through interviews. Individual stories and examples from each teacher were used to document the promotion of caring relationships of effective teachers. As a researcher, I collectively looked for consistency between teachers' beliefs and practices because the goal of the study was to investigate the caring beliefs and practices, to whatever extent and whatever kind, of all six nominated effective teachers. The interviews and field notes were analyzed for themes by looking for patterns, recurring ideas and descriptions pertinent to answering the research questions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Most research on effective teaching has not fully addressed the "relational" nature of teaching and learning (Noddings, 2001; Prillaman & Eaker, 1994). The question of *how* learning and achievement happens within the classrooms of effective teachers and their students is an area not yet fully explored by educational researchers or designers of reform. Effective teachers have not been given opportunities to express the role that their caring beliefs and practices play in

helping students learn. There is a lack of research investigating the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers. The research in this area has mainly focused on student achievement and neglected affective areas like caring.

Also, there is a debate whether effective teaching and caring relationships are compatible in the classroom (Guisto, 2011; Hinton, Miyamoto, & Della-Chiesa, 2008). Some researchers maintain that developing personal relationships with students may detract from effective teaching for achievement. These researchers assert that effective teachers have a task-oriented relationship with students, which emphasizes getting the job of learning done in an efficient business-like manner (Gerwin, 2004). This view of effective teaching is consistent with current test-driven reform initiatives. Another view of effective teaching maintains that students, especially underachieving students, learn best when the teacher is both task-oriented and personally supportive (Thompson, 2010; Fitzsimmons & Lanphar, 2011). There is a lack of research that investigates the educational beliefs and practices of effective teachers to determine which view of teaching is best for underachieving students.

Another research problem relates to how the universal need for caring may be specifically expressed according to the diverse cultural backgrounds of interacting teachers and students. Different cultural backgrounds in classrooms present a wide variety of challenges for both teachers and students. There is a research need to further study the culturally diverse expressions of the universal need for caring between the teacher and students in the classroom (Bartley, 2007).

National and state lawmakers have not recognized the beliefs and practices of caring teachers that effectively support student learning as a way to address poor student achievement.

Teachers have not been provided with a broad range of ideas from legislative mandates involving the affective domain of learning for improving student performance. Teachers have been driven to teach underachieving students in ways that are reflective of mandatory, standardized end-of-year testing. Many of the underachieving students are economically disadvantaged, exhibit disabilities, have limited English proficiency, or come from minority racial and ethnic groups. These are the types of student groups that must meet separate measurable annual objectives as mandated in NCLB. Therefore, many students, especially those at low-performing schools, have been subjected to teachers struggling to satisfy stakeholders solely concerned with students who can meet expectations on a one-time, standardized test at the end of the school year. Consequently, many low-achieving students who are considered “at-risk” have not had the opportunity to experience a caring teacher who establishes a relationship of mutual respect with them. There is a clear need for better and “more informed” research-based initiatives to assist “at-risk” students (Nettles, Mucherah, & Jones, 2000). Becker and Luthar (2002) propose that academic expectations will be unsuccessful, particularly for “at-risk” students, if not coupled with attention to “socio-emotional factors associated with achievement motivation and performance” (p. 200).

### **Research Questions**

The first purpose of this study was to identify the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers, and the second purpose was to determine the diverse ways in which these beliefs and practices may be influenced by cultural or socioeconomic factors. Specifically, the study explored effective teachers’ beliefs about caring relationships with students and their teaching practices that demonstrated caring relationships. Particular attention was given to teacher relationships with “at-risk” students who have experienced personally significant improvement

in student achievement. The second focus investigated the various ways effective teachers' beliefs and practices of caring may be influenced by the teachers' cultural backgrounds and/or the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students as indicated by their Title I eligibility.

#### Research Questions:

1. What are effective teachers' beliefs about caring relationships and interactions with their students, especially with underachieving students?
2. What are effective teachers' practices that demonstrate caring relationships and interactions with their students, especially with underachieving students?
3. In what ways may effective teachers' beliefs and practices of caring be influenced by the teachers' cultural backgrounds and/or the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students as indicated by their Title I eligibility?

#### **Definitions of Terms**

The following terms are defined with a short clarification added to show how they are applicable to this study.

*Achievement:* Standardized test measures of school achievement may include percentages of students, school-wide and particular subgroups, who meet or exceed the proficient level on state-wide academic assessments mandated by legislation defining Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measuring the progress of all public schools (NCLB, 2003). In the present study, achievement was subjectively evaluated by school colleagues based on their nominations of effective teachers

supporting student learning and overall success. Achievement may also be used in an objective way such as test scores, grades, or graduation rates.

*Achievement gap:* The disparity in academic performance between groups of students, which shows up in success measures such as grades, standardized test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college completion rates (Education Week, 2011). The achievement gap describes the accountability system from NCLB that shows performance gaps on standardized tests between non-Hispanic White students and other groups like African-American and Hispanic students.

*Achievement gap students:* Groups of public school students who are economically disadvantaged, from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency who must meet separate measurable annual objectives as mandated in legislation for continuous and substantial improvement (NCLB, 2003). Achievement gap students are those students who are typically identified and separated out in achievement score reports due to their socioeconomic or cultural status.

*Affect:* The feeling tone and manner in which we deal with emotional qualities such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasms, motivations, and attitudes (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1973). Affect is the way students react emotionally to learning, which can enhance, inhibit, or prevent student learning.

*Affective domain:* “Objectives which emphasize a feeling tone, an emotion, or a degree of acceptance or rejection” (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964, p. 7). The affective domain is the critical component of learning that encourages students to show a willingness to listen, participate, be involved and finally change their behaviors.

*“At-risk”*: Educationally disadvantaged students from low-economic background, minority groups, or whose parents are not directly involved in their education and who fail to learn at school or drop out of school (Kaufman, Bradbury, & Owings, 1992). “At-risk” students are those students who statistically more likely than others to fail academically due to their circumstances such as having a low socioeconomic status or minority ethnic background.

*Caring*: A natural phenomenon occurring in the human condition, which recognizes “human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence” (Noddings, 1984, p. 4). Caring is feeling and exhibiting a sincere concern and empathy for others as shown by a person’s actions.

*Caring in education*: When teachers strive first to establish and maintain caring relations, and the relations exhibit an integrity that provides a foundation for everything the teacher and student do together (Noddings, 2005). Caring in education is a teacher taking the time to develop relationships with students in addition to pursuing certain academic goals.

*Culture*: Values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, religion, or other shared identity” (Nieto, 2004, p. 146). Culture not only includes ethnic or racial backgrounds but also smaller circles of family, friends, and community as well.

*Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)*: Teaching that uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for the students (Gay, 2000). CRT acknowledges the value of the cultural heritages of

different ethnic groups in classrooms, which affects students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning.

*Effective teachers:* Teachers who successfully combine the technical side of teaching with the expressive side (Prillaman et al., 1994). Teachers who are effective emphasize relationships in educational contexts, which allow students to have more opportunities to experience improved student learning and overall student success.

*English Learners (ELs):* Public school students in grades K-12 who are eligible to participate in English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) state-funded instructional programs for academic and social language development. ELs are students who speak a second language and require extra support to be successful in classrooms integrating language and state standards.

*Ethic of care:* The idea of “meeting the other morally” (Noddings, 1984, p. 4). Ethic of care is a theory that is centered on the interdependence of all individuals and that certain groups of people are more vulnerable than others such as “at-risk” students. Non-vulnerable groups, such as teachers, should give extra consideration to those who are vulnerable and are affected by the choices of others.

### **Significance of the Study**

During this time of accountability and reformation of K-12 education, which defines achievement by state test scores, heavy emphasis is given almost exclusively to the cognitive domain of learning. Today's teachers are forced to mesh their own personal beliefs and practices of teaching and learning with the accountability measures of curriculum standards and assessment. Thus, the beliefs and practices of effective teachers—who consistently help



struggling students achieve through caring relationships—are minimized and rarely recognized as a valid pathway to close the achievement gap.

Focus on the affective domain of learning for “at-risk” learners from effective teachers guided my research for several reasons. First, very little attention has been given to this idea in reform, which is the required law for addressing the achievement gap. Today’s students are increasingly becoming faced with personal issues that greatly affect their learning and at the same time teachers are faced with increased diversity, curriculum standards, and standardized testing in their classrooms. Secondly, related studies on caring teachers working with “at-risk” students have primarily focused on the observable actions and traits of the teachers instead of what the teachers themselves believe and practice about the relational elements of caring that take place in their classrooms. Lastly, emerging studies have begun to uncover the biological interdependence of learning and emotion. Scientific evidence that emotion is fundamental to learning is beginning to influence long-standing ideological debates about whether schools are responsible for emotional development (Hinton, Miyamoto, & Della-Chiesa, 2008). These new studies linking neuroscience to instructional achievement need extensive exploration.

The uncommon idea of looking at what is working well with underachieving students from the personal perspectives of teachers made this study somewhat unique. Surprisingly, there is a minimal amount of literature focusing on affective learning to close the achievement gap in reform initiatives for pre-service and in-service teacher programs. Professional learning communities may use this study to provide insight to an alternative vision for improving the lives and learning of students identified in the achievement gap. Principals and school administration may use this research to make decisions, enact programs, and provide alternative solutions to ensure student success in the classroom. This study could provide teachers with relevant

information for future experiences with “at-risk” students not found in typical reform initiatives such as RT3 and curricula mandates such as the new Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS). This study has potential significance for contributing to literature about effective teachers’ beliefs and practices resulting from caring teacher-student relationships, which could transform teacher-preparation programs, teacher in-service programs, and hiring practices.

Finally, as an English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher, this study provided the researcher with helpful information as she navigates teaching language through content curriculum to students struggling with overwhelming academic and social needs due to minimal English language proficiency and cultural differences. Features of academic language operate within sociocultural contexts, which necessitate the need for teachers to pay special attention to each student’s cultural and economic background. Van Galen (1993) stated that if teachers understand caring through the eyes of Nel Noddings, they must take an active role in the cultural, economic, and social lives of students to appreciate the reality through which school is interpreted. ELs (English Learners) are typically considered “at-risk” students in many classrooms because teachers do not have the time or resources to meet their needs along with the many other diverse learners. As a result, many ELs lag behind their classmates on state standardized tests. The results of this study helped the researcher more fully understand and support the needs of ELs and their content teachers responsible for progress as defined by annual testing results.

### **Researcher’s Perspective**

I must admit that I was personally motivated to pursue this research study because of what I have witnessed in the last thirty years in education. Every year, without fail, I would see

or hear about a handful of students struggling to perform on grade level with their peers, who would begin new relationships with their teachers in the fall. Many times the students were affected by factors such as poverty, language deficiencies or learning disabilities like those students identified as “at-risk” according to achievement gap standards. Yet in most cases, by the closing of the school year, the students made huge gains and became successful in school. This scenario of struggling students has greatly magnified, as the numbers of “at-risk” students seem to be much greater. As teachers before NCLB, many of us believed that teaching automatically included caring as shown by our high expectations and relationships of mutual respect with our students. We felt free to exercise beliefs and practices that encouraged and valued students as human beings.

I am very interested in knowing what effective teachers in today’s classrooms think about caring beliefs and practices for two reasons. First, numerous family conditions in our current society—such as absent or single parents, blended families, incarcerated parents and homelessness—justify the need for a caring educator in each classroom. The needs of students seem greater but the opportunities for teachers to build relationships with these students seem less, which leads to my second reason concerning the misguided efforts of current educational reforms. Over the last few years, I have come to realize that the standardized knowledge and assessments that our politicians deem so necessary as the number one aim of education, may be the exact opposite of what “at-risk” learners need. Last year my colleagues selected me as the “2012-2013 Teacher of the Year” based on their observations and perceptions of me and I was a finalist in the county competition based on a narrative about my personal beliefs and practices. In addition, I was awarded a TESOL (Teachers of English as a Second Language) grant based on my ideas about relationships of caring adults to promote literacy. These awards helped to

validate my particular viewpoints about the best way to approach the learning and lives of students. Opportunities for teachers to express and feel validated about their beliefs and practices are rare in most school systems. I want to know if other educators share my feelings and if they feel that relationships can be a successful way to narrow the achievement gap with diverse groups of struggling students.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study of the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers who have had positive influence on students was organized into five chapters. Chapter 1, the introduction, consists of an overview of the study, a statement of the research problem, research questions, key term definitions, significance of the study, and organization of the study.

Chapter 2, the review of literature, includes the theoretical framework of caring focusing on the link between teachers' caring beliefs and practices and interpersonal relationships as well as cultural and emotional factors affecting student achievement.

Chapter 3, the methodology, consists of an explanation of the particular case study research method, validity of the study, selection criteria, sampling techniques, data collection, and analysis. Findings are reported in chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 4, the individual thematic findings consists of themes extracted from each of the six teachers identified as effective teachers, what they believe about a caring relationship concerning student achievement, what they practice that demonstrates caring relationships, and what ways effective teachers' beliefs and practices of caring can be influenced by the teachers' cultural backgrounds and/or the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students.

Chapter 5, the conclusion is a discussion of common thematic findings across the group of teachers, educational implications, and recommendations.

## **Summary**

The introduction critiques some of the shortcomings of current educational reform and examines the affective needs of underachieving students and how caring educators may help to solve the achievement gap dilemma. In addition, the research questions were established, the theoretical framework explained, and technical terms defined for clarification. Research has shown that the needs of many 21<sup>st</sup> century learners have not been adequately addressed for students to succeed. Furthermore, research documents effective teachers with caring qualities exert a powerful influence on academic achievement in schools with high rates of student success, including those with diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, there are many unknowns and questions of how and why some struggling students become successful each year in particular classrooms in part because the voices of caring teachers have not been heard. Little research has been conducted to identify the personal, caring beliefs and self-prescribed practices of successful, effective teachers. Their voices have been drowned out by the heavy-handed emphasis on impersonal standardized curriculums and accountability policies. The present study illuminated the perceptions of caring teachers working with underachieving students and provided insight into how to help solve the current achievement gap dilemma.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

For the last ten years in the United States, well-intentioned reform has failed to improve the academic achievement of many students. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) showed the averaged freshmen graduation rate (AFGR) among public school students in the United States for the graduating class was 74.9 percent (Chapman, Laird, & Kewalramani, 2010). This sobering statistic leaves one fourth of our students not finishing high school with dropout rates of 9.9 percent for Blacks and 18.3 percent for Hispanics. These rates are significantly higher than the White dropout rate of 4.8 and Asian/Island Pacific Islanders of 4.4 percent. These statistics coincide with the earlier Georgia RT3 data showing two cultural groups with a large representation in the at-risk student population (GA DOE, 2010). In our American society, school is considered to be the path of opportunity for all students, regardless of their demographics, to have access to an education that improves their lives as adults. Addressing the needs of the students who are at risk of school failure is complex, which requires reformers to consider alternatives to the shortcomings of current reforms.

To effectively review, summarize, and present the relevant literature, this chapter is divided into four sections. Each section provides an important perspective on the caring beliefs and practices of teachers. The first section is a review of theoretical frameworks for studying the relationships of effective teachers working with “at-risk” students in educational settings. Secondly, the link between the affective and cognitive domains of learning is addressed to provide an understanding of how caring teachers daily merge the demands of students’ cognitive learning with their emotional needs. The third section outlines a discourse of effective teaching for interpreting the definition of an effective teacher. Lastly, the chapter closes with studies

related to teacher beliefs, practices, and cultural influences.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the present study was based on three complementary perspectives: Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, Noddings' theory of caring, and Gay's theory of culturally responsive teaching. The theories of Vygotsky, Noddings, and Gay include an underlying premise that emphasizes the importance of personal relationships in student learning environments ((Vygotsky, 1978; Noddings, 1984; Gay, 2000). Their theories support the view that cognition is interactive with the social environment and this interaction is at the heart of teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Noddings, 1984; Gay, 2000). All three theorists promote the idea that children in schools ideally need social environments that support both their academic and personal lives.

A caring, social relationship between the teacher and the student is consistent with the theory of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) in which learning is not an independent process but a social construction of mutually shared meanings. Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism provides a general theoretical framework for the present study of effective teachers' caring beliefs and practices. Vygotsky (1978) recognized the important idea of social interaction being meshed with language, content, and thought. He found that the social experiences of children determine their thought development, which later becomes internalized. Typical learning strategies in social constructivist classrooms include two-way interactions like discussions, inquiries, constructive arguments, cooperative learning, dialogue, and peer tutoring. All of these interactive learning activities promote interpersonal connections that may have profound consequences on students' development and academic success.

Consistent with social constructivism's general theoretical framework, Noddings' theory

of caring provides a specific framework for understanding the social interactions involved in caring relationships. She has extensively researched and written about the ethic of care, providing a comprehensive foundational basis to study teachers' perceptions of caring that has worldwide appeal. For the purposes of this study, Noddings' theory provides the conceptual framework for examining teacher-student relationships and the ethic of care. Noddings (1984, 1988, 1995, 2006) has extensively studied how teachers may implement care in the context of the classroom.

The term *ethic of care* is most frequently associated with the feminist researchers Noddings and Gilligan (Tronto, 1993). Goodman (2008) and Paley (2002) confirmed that both of these researchers are considered seminal in the study of care and the helping professions. Gilligan (1982) uses the term "ethic of care" to express a way of relating to others that is based on compassion, respect for others, and understanding. It is Noddings' view that relationships play critical roles in the development of human moral reasoning (Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996). A foundational theory of caring is provided by Noddings (1984) in her first major work, *Caring*, where she states that care is basic to life and all people have a need to be cared for. The ethic of care, itself, is based, on the idea of "meeting the other, morally" (Noddings, 1984, p. 4). It is a natural phenomenon occurring in the human condition, by which "we recognize human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence" (Noddings, 1984, p. 4). In other words, humans have an innate, universal need to connect with and relate to each other. The idea of caring for others and being cared for gives humans meaning and purpose in life. How individuals connect to others provides a meaningful framework for making sense of life's experiences and choices.

Central to Noddings' understanding of care are the concepts of "engrossment" and



“motivational displacement” (Bergman, 2004). It is her position that genuine caring involves being engrossed in the situation that the “cared for” is experiencing, with the caregiver assuming the experience or position of the “cared for,” in order to fully understand what that person is going through (Noddings, 1988). Motivational displacement refers to the caregiver shifting his “motive energy” to that of the “cared for,” in order to fully appreciate the needs of the “cared for” (Noddings, 2008).

Though many researchers have provided definitions of care, few have provided suggestions as to how we can put the theory of caring into practice. Noddings (1988) provides a basic outline of action for implementing an ethic of care by using four components of caring: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Noddings explains that modeling, practice, dialogue, and confirmation are practices through which teachers can engage in caring relationships with their students.

Teachers will model caring when they encourage self-affirmation among students in their classroom. Teachers will set a standard to be role models for their students, knowing that students often carefully interpret their actions. As Noddings (1995) states, modeling serves to show that we are:

mainly concerned with the growth of our students as carers and cared-for. We have to show in our own behavior what it means to care. Thus we do not merely tell them to care and give them texts to read on the subject; we demonstrate our caring in our relations with them. (p. 190)

Caring teachers teach by example. By exemplifying caring and respectable behaviors, students are provided with a model to follow and understand.

The second component of caring is dialogue. Through dialogue, teachers and students

spend time considering each other's perspectives, both openly and respectfully. From the beginning, no preconceived conclusions or assumptions are to be made about the other. Dialogue is meant to develop a trustworthy relationship, a crucial component of establishing care in classrooms. Through dialogue or conversation, both teacher and student search for reciprocal understanding. "Two people are not in dialogue simply because they are talking to each other. Dialogue requires listening, a genuine respect for the partner in dialogue, and a mutual commitment to inform, learn, and make decisions" (Noddings, 2006, p. 80). In addition to reciprocal understanding between teacher and student, dialogue also serves as a function in which controversial topics can safely be discussed in the classroom to allow for critical thinking. For broadening students' thinking and having them engage in critical thinking, open and respectful dialogue is essential to creating a caring atmosphere.

The third component of caring is practice. Practice in caring is nurtured among students in a classroom context when students are given the opportunity to exercise their care. "In a classroom dedicated to caring, students are encouraged to support each other; opportunities for peer interaction are provided, and the quality of that interaction is as important [to both teacher and students] as the academic outcomes" (Noddings, 1995, p. 223). Practice supports the idea that care theory not only emphasizes academic outcomes, but emphasizes the value of human relationships as well. For example, teachers may encourage small group work when completing assignments, or encourage caring for a classroom pet while learning about it. In this particular context, a classroom that offers opportunities to practice caring can also engage students in conversations related to life preparation as well. Caring can extend beyond merely human interactions and academic rigor and prepare students for life.

The last component of caring is confirmation. Through confirmation, the teacher

encourages and shapes the student by assisting in the construction of his or her self-ideal (Noddings, 1995, p. 223). Noddings (1984) states that when we “attribute the best possible motive consonant with reality to the cared-for, we confirm him; that is, we reveal to him an attainable image of himself that is lovelier than that manifested in his present act” (p. 193). Students view the caring adult as the wiser being, with helpful and informative advice for them. Students are able to trust the caring adult who encourages and shapes their self-ideal.

Noddings further explains the relationships between confirmation and dialogue and practice.

Confirmation, the loveliest of human functions, depends upon and interacts with dialogue and practice. I cannot confirm a child unless I talk with him and engage in cooperative practice with him...Simply to have high expectations for our students in general is not confirmation...To confirm, I must see and receive the other—see clearly what he has actually done, and receive the feelings with which it was done. (p. 196)

Throughout confirmation, students are viewed through a perspective that always considers students’ better qualities and assumes the best. Through confirmation, teachers believe in students’ capabilities even when they do not believe in themselves. Rather than viewing students as hopeless individuals in terms of academic and social achievement, teachers can work with students toward achieving students’ self-ethical ideals.

In consideration of the influence of teacher caring beliefs and practices on student academic performance and overall student success, Gay (2000) provides a cultural perspective on caring. She devoted an entire chapter on the power of caring in her book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*. She felt that caring interpersonal relationships are characterized by patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment for the participants. Gay further

stated that caring relationships in schools seem to be an obvious answer to the needs of many of our underachieving students, especially those with cultural differences and socioeconomic backgrounds unlike most of their mainstream teachers. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a way for teachers to show care to culturally diverse students. CRT can be tied to teachers' beliefs and practices of caring that are influenced by their own cultural backgrounds as well as the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of their students.

The practice of CRT explains how to use culture and experiences of different ethnic groups as a launch pad to teach more effectively (Gay, 2000). Gay proposed that teachers of any race must have courage, competence, and confidence to teach in a culturally relevant way.

Culturally responsive teaching is defined by Gay as:

Cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and frames of references and performance styles of ethnically diverse students used to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. (p. 29)

Making connections with students and responding to their cultural identities, are central to culturally responsive teaching. Ladson-Billings (2000) defined three characteristics of culturally relevant pedagogy: Teachers' conceptions of themselves and others, the way social relations are structured, and their conceptions of knowledge.

Culturally responsive teaching is a culture-specific expression of the universal need for caring. Caring in the form of teacher attitudes, expectations and behaviors about students' human value, intellectual capability, and performance responsibilities has major implications for students of color. When teachers express concern for the emotional well-being and academic success of culturally diverse students, it is the most effective form of caring (Gay, 2000). Gay further stated that CRT is caring that understands that school performance takes place within a

complex sociocultural setting and is filtered through the cultural backgrounds of both students and teachers. Meaningful caring communication cannot exist without culture, culture cannot be known without communication, and teaching and learning cannot occur without communication or culture (Gay, 2000). Multiple studies (Croninger & Lee, 2005; Ogbu, 2003; Tosolt, 2009) align with Gay's position on teaching caring and connections with students, but add that the situation is much more critical for minority and "at-risk" students. Of key importance, these students-whose social background and academic history puts them at risk for school failure- have the most to lose from academic environments that lack this teacher-student connectedness.

In summary, Noddings' theory of caring is consistent with Vygotsky's social constructivism because it recognizes that optimal learning is socially constructed within the context of a caring relationship. In addition, Gay's theory of culturally responsive teaching helps educators to understand that even though caring is a universal need, it may be expressed and nurtured in culturally specific ways. The next section will clarify differing viewpoints of learning that are relevant to the theory of caring as defined by Noddings (1984).

### **Cognitive and Affective Domains**

Historically, what we emphasize for teachers swings between the cognitive and affective domains. Teachers have to find a balance that allows students to learn, practice, and integrate intellectual and social skills. The everyday application of the three theories cited above requires affective teaching within a cognitive environment. This section will explain how the cognitive and affective domains each have critical implications for today's teachers and students.

Emphasis on the cognitive domain is necessary for teachers helping students experience gain knowledge in content areas on annual standardized tests. On the other hand, research literature on caring, teacher-student relationships suggests that the affective domain is just as necessary as

the cognitive domain for student achievement. In other words, it was important for the present study to explore both domains as they relate to the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers.

In many ways, the humanistic thinking noted by Noddings is consistent with other facets of learning embedded within the caring theory. The basic idea of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which emphasizes how psychological needs must be satisfied before others can be addressed, is an important foundation for caring relationships in the classroom (Maslow, 1971). According to Maslow, cognitive needs cannot be addressed until the lower levels of physiological, safety, belonging, and self-esteem are met. A caring teacher meets students' affective needs for safety, belonging, and self-esteem to support their cognitive needs for learning. When student affective needs are neglected or frustrated, their cognitive needs are undermined.

Attention to optimal student learning environments as noted by Maslow years ago continues today. Rivera (2010) pointed out that much of the recent conflict about educational reform concerns differing viewpoints on cognitive versus affective ways of teaching and learning. Non-negotiable curriculum standards and assessment requirements are handed down to teachers each year. Teachers spend hours each day in the classroom with young students who must "meet" the standards on annual tests. Given the demands of testing, teachers must decide how they will communicate their instructional goals. They may decide to focus solely on the cognitive demands of testing or they may decide to balance the cognitive demands with the affective needs of their students. Although teachers have a choice, many are finding it more difficult to find an optimal balance of the cognitive demands and the affective needs given the high pressure to perform on annual tests. Noddings (1992) emphasized close, reciprocal relationships between teachers and students that clearly involved the *affective domain*. Noddings

four components of care fit very easily into the emotional realm of the affective domain.

The affective domain can be defined as the learning objectives related to and manner in which we deal with emotionality, such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasms, motivations and attitudes (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1973). Affective teaching recognizes that the intellect and emotions are not separate entities. Some examples of affective strategies include cooperative learning activities, encouraging two-way communication in the classroom, and clear communication of high and obtainable learning goals. Affective learning activities are academically relevant and engaging. Creativity is encouraged in an emotionally safe and anxiety-free learning environment.

Affective teaching has been incorporated into the broader, contemporary topic of social and emotional learning. Social and emotional learning or SEL, is the process through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling and behaving to achieve important life tasks including school success (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). These authors stated that the SEL framework integrates research-validated, learner-centered psychological principles of cognitive, social and emotional learning where students partner with their teachers to co-create learning experiences. Additionally, students and teachers work toward cognitive outcomes as well as social or emotional nonacademic outcomes in caring learning environments. Zins et al. (2004) assert that one of the key components of a caring SEL community is respectful, supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents. Caring relations between teachers and students foster a desire to learn and give students a connection to a safe, caring, orderly environment conducive to learning. Caring is embedded throughout SEL programs that connect social emotional education and school success. Elias and colleagues (as cited in Zins et al., 2004) further add that schools, which give students opportunities to practice SEL skills, enable them to

become knowledgeable, caring, and productive members of society.

According to Hinton, Miyamoto and Della-Chiesa (2008), affective feelings or emotion shapes cognitive processing. Fear conditioning (Pavlov, 1927; LeDoux, 2000) provides an illustrative example of the repeated pairing of an initially neutral stimulus with a noxious unconditioned stimulus. Unfortunately, this entanglement of emotion and cognition also occurs in school settings (Hinton et al., 2008). For example, struggling math students form an association between math and negative emotions, which elicits a fear response. On the other hand, students can learn to regulate their emotions by using a cognitive appraisal to calm negative emotional reactions (Fischer & Bidell, 2006). Fearful students can learn to regulate their emotions and cognitively appraise the situation with thoughts to slow down their fear responses in order to promote optimal learning. Krashen's (1982) work with ELs captured the relationship between affective variables and second language acquisition. He found that the "affective filter," or attitudinal factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety, is related directly to the success of students learning a second language. The process of learning a second language varies with the level of students' affective filters. Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will have a strong or high affective filter and comprehensible input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for second language acquisition. Caring teachers can help students to develop strategies for coping with stressful or negative experiences. A key aspect of this is to teach students how to use language to communicate difficulties (Noddings, 1992). If teachers develop caring relationships with their students, they will more likely trust each other enough to share problems through conversation.

A qualitative investigation by Fitzsimmons and Lanphar (2011) explored the role of emotions in the learning process from students' perspectives. The findings revealed that a series



of inter-connected, socio-emotional reflective teacher practices provided avenues for deeper engagement in the learning process. Caring teachers as resources are crucial for authentic learning because “the process of caring” is an emotionally laden course of action that is central to educating young students (Fitzsimmons & Lanphar, 2011). In this study, the teacher was a facilitator that stimulated creative pathways through a deliberate focus on emotional connections. Learning is likely to be more effective if educators help to minimize stress and fear at school, teach students emotional regulation strategies, and provide a positive learning environment that is motivating to students.

Because of the complexity of affective domain issues, findings from Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, and Perry (2002) have given a boost to advocates of affective teaching. In the past, the biological link between affect and cognitive processing has largely been ignored (Pekrun et al., 2002). Recent research now provides support for understanding the relation of the affective and cognitive domains. Neuroscientists have begun to uncover the biological interdependence of learning and emotion. Rose and Strangeman (2007) classified the major brain networks involved in learning: recognition network, strategic network, and the affective network. The affective network is primarily comprised of a set of structures in the center of the brain collectively known as the limbic system. Historically called the “seat of emotion,” the limbic system contains many brain regions that play a central role in the processing of emotional experience, social information, and reward and punishment (Steinberg, 2011). Steinberg also shared Paus and Spear’s findings of an increased interest in the white matter of the brain, which reflects improved connectivity within and across brain regions. The limbic system is highly connected with cortical areas involved in cognitive processing (LeDoux, 2000). Jensen (2005) stated that emotions affect memory and brain function so when a person feels content, the brain releases endorphins that

enhance memory skills. Learning-conducive classrooms that are low in threat and high in reasonable challenge, engage and motivate students to devote more brain activity to learning (Willis, 2007). Brain-based research does not introduce new strategies for teachers but provides a stronger rationale as to why particular styles of teaching and certain existing teaching strategies are more effective (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004).

Malikow (2006) stated that teaching in the affective domain may be summarized by the following active verbs: feel, listen, and defend. However, much of what is done in today's classrooms is absent of these active learning experiences. The lack of the affective domain in schools is evident in the over reliance of text books, traditional modes of instruction, and standardized testing that develops, measures, and focuses on cognitive skills. The high-stakes testing environment that schools face today has forced systems already dominated by cognitive practices, to discourage the use of critical instruction time to address learning objectives related to the affective domain. It is much easier for teachers to focus on students' performance of cognitive skills such as knowledge, recall, or comprehension rather than to understand the feelings or motivation toward learning these skills, especially with "at-risk" students. The linkage of education and neuroscience provides a new understanding about the interface of biology, learning, and culture: a critical but difficult topic to investigate systematically in educational research (Davis, 2003; Rueda, 2006; Rueda, August, & Golenberg, 2006). One view expressing the necessity of emotion in classrooms is the "affective dimension is not just a simple catalyst, but a necessary condition for learning to occur" (Perrier & Nsengiyumva, 2003, p. 1124). Clearly, the connection between affective and cognitive domains can be viewed with new understandings and may have important implications for improving the lives and learning of students.

This section addressed the link between the affective and cognitive domains of learning to provide an understanding of how caring teachers meet the academic demands as well as the social or emotional needs of their students each day. The following section will briefly summarize a discourse of effective teaching for understanding and interpreting various meanings of effective teaching.

### **The Discourse of Effective Teaching**

The history of how “effective teachers” have been defined and studied as outlined by Prillaman, Eaker, and Kendrick (1994) identified particular shifts over time as well as two divergent aspects of educational thinking. Prillaman and colleagues established that effective teachers have been historically defined through their characteristics, methods, classroom climate, and more recently, competencies. Furthermore, they found that a massive amount of research beginning in the 1970’s that defined an effective teacher as one who can perform the behaviors that contribute to high student achievement as measured by standardized achievement tests. It is natural and justifiable to acknowledge certain appropriate practices that might inform educators about satisfaction with the technical aspects of their work such as annual testing. However, recent discussions have been limited to the technical side of teachers’ work, or the *language of the technical* only. This emphasis on technical work has dominated the research on effective teachers and has been reinforced by school reform movements (Prillaman et al., 1994). For example, researchers have created checklists and rating scales to evaluate the demonstration of certain competencies for an educator to be considered technically effective as a teacher. According to the writers of *The Tapestry of Caring*, (Prillaman et al., 1994) reform movements have promoted increased, measurable accountability, which essentially excludes the “something else” that practitioners of education believe to be so essential.

The “something else” or the *language of the expressive*, is the other strand of discussion that practitioners indicate is left out of the discourse about effective teaching. In addition, these researchers found that practicing teachers often engage in conversations that emphasize the *language of the expressive* emphasizing relationships among people within educational contexts. The *language of the expressive* offers an alternative way of talking about and studying effective teaching that complements the technical language descriptions. The theory of caring, an expressive language, involves personal interconnections between teachers and students on a daily basis.

Nearly two decades after the publication of *The Tapestry of Caring*, these two differing strands of discourse, the technical and the expressive, continue to affect educational practice and give conflicting messages to practitioners and policy makers. Various degrees of these two strands have occurred simultaneously in the past but are somewhat conflicting approaches to education that produce divergent results. The present study examined caring, an expressive language, within the context of effective teaching, the language of the technical.

This section highlighted contradictory ways that educational stakeholders have approached the idea of what constitutes effective teaching in American schools. The following section will illustrate views of teacher caring within the classroom through the discussion of relevant literature regarding how teachers and students describe caring.

### **Teacher Beliefs, Practices, and Cultural Influences**

This section reviews studies directly related to the present study’s three research questions concerning effective teacher beliefs, practices, and cultural influences, especially related to caring. The studies (Buese, 2005; Thompson, 2010; Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Cha, 2008; Martin, 2009) provide key information to inform the present study in terms of answering

the research questions and strategies to obtain data. Highlights from the studies include thematic findings about the beliefs, practices, and cultural influences and their relationship to Noddings' four components of caring. Definitions of effective teachers were noted if identified in the studies as well as similarities and differences to the present study.

Buese (2005) conducted a study in Maryland during the first year of the restructuring of its previously high-stakes accountability system, in response to the 2002 ratification of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The intent of this study was to find out how exemplary teachers' constructs of good teaching reside in a high-stakes accountability climate. Two overlapping areas of study, teaching practices and educational accountability, as well as Abelmann and Elmore's (1999) school site accountability theory, were used for the conceptual framework. The overarching question for the study was: How do Maryland Teacher of the Year candidates understand, construct, and realize their practices in diverse classroom contexts in a changing, regulated high-stakes accountability system? An interpretive/descriptive case study involving two fifth grade and one eighth grade mathematics teachers was conducted over an eight month period. Although each teacher addressed the detailed academic achievement goals of Maryland's accountability policies in their practices, the underlying values, beliefs, and philosophies of the educational goals were not explicitly expressed to them by state lawmakers. Consequently, the teachers' constructs of good teaching were sometimes at odds with official messages about accountability teaching. This study had a similar methodology and topic as mine but the theoretical framework was different. I chose the caring theory instead of school site accountability, and all of my participants were elementary teachers instead of middle school math teachers. This study is relevant to my study because it reported how effective teachers take on academic achievement with their students within the guidelines of accountability reform.

Effective teachers were defined by those who had been nominated by their school system to compete as a candidate for the state Teacher of the Year. Results indicated that the teachers' constructs of good teaching were based primarily on their beliefs about teaching as a moral endeavor with regard to their relationships with their students, the management of their classroom, and the way they represented mathematical knowledge and learning. The practices of the effective teachers were evident in their classroom management and delivery of mathematical knowledge as observed by the researcher. Noddings' four components were not explicitly identified by the researchers, but parts of modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation can be found informally in the results about their beliefs and practices with students.

Thompson (2010) conducted a study of caring teachers to explore what caring looks like in the classroom. Participants were teachers who administrators and counselors thought of as caring teachers that work well with "at-risk" students to create a pool of "effective teacher" participants. No particular theory framed the study but research highlighting how essential caring adults are for academically "at-risk" students was listed as a reason for the research questions. The central research question asked what defined a caring teacher. The researcher recruited two middle school and two high school teachers to participate in the multiple case study. Each participant had multiple interviews and observations. In addition, another teacher within the school supplied information about each particular teacher for a secondary viewpoint. The data was analyzed and the cross case analysis resulted in six themes across the four cases: the role of relationships, perspective on "at-risk" students, providing opportunities for students to develop a positive sense of themselves, the value of a positive classroom experience for both students and teacher, negotiating power, and flexibility. Findings showed that both academic content and caring were important; therefore, classroom processes that integrate both seem to offer teachers

opportunities to meet relational and academic goals. This study had a similar purpose to mine but the participants were teachers of older students. Also, other teachers were able to give their opinions about the selected caring teachers. Even though a theoretical perspective was not identified, the findings support the theory of caring. The methodology was the same as mine since it was a multiple case study except for including the interpretation of another adult in the school about each participant's work. The findings appear consistent with the results I encountered except that content mastery is usually considered more critical for "at-risk" middle or high school students than younger students. The theme of relationship roles between teachers and students supports all four of Noddings care theory components and the theme of providing positive opportunities in the classroom is aligned directly with Noddings' practice and dialogue.

Bartley (2007) used the theory of care and the attachment theory for a multiple case study. The two main questions addressed were about how caring teachers define and manifest care in their classrooms and how they think care impacts their students. Topical questions included how teachers demonstrate care to students in a culturally diverse classroom. The purpose of the study reflected a research design consisting of a phenomenological approach that revealed the understandings of the participants within the context of their experiences. From teachers' reported understandings of care, common themes emerged defining care, explaining how it was shown in the classroom, and how it affected students. In these ethnically diverse classrooms, it was found that caring teachers look at each student as an individual, and seek to teach each student with the care most appropriate to them. However, the results were inconclusive about the impact of student ethnicity on the teachers' constructions. This study had very similar participants and methodology as the present study but there is no mention of achievement within the questions, which was an important part of my purpose. The attachment

theory is not that different from the care theory because it includes a warm, intimate continuous relationship. This study was very relevant to cultural influences because teacher participants were selected from schools with at least one-third students of color out of the total population. Teachers seeking to provide an individualized approach in diverse classrooms supports the idea that cultural differences create the need for taking a close look at each child when caring for students. The beliefs and practices of teachers who customize their approaches with students implies that modeling, practice, dialogue and confirmation will be filtered through a socio-cultural lens that is appropriate for each student.

Bongo (2011) examined how a group of middle school teachers understood and described caring in their classrooms through a qualitative study. He wanted to know if the teachers' descriptions aligned with Noddings' (1984) theory of caring. His first research question investigated how teachers describe and understand caring behaviors towards their students. The second research question in the study asked: In what ways, if any, do these twelve teachers' descriptions and understandings of caring reflect Noddings' (1984) theory of caring? Bongo did not require "effective" teachers for his study but chose twelve participants based on two factors. First, priority was given to participants from a grade level in the school experiencing a growing number of discipline referrals. Secondly, participants within this grade level were chosen to represent demographics similar to the researcher's school. The study was different than mine because observations were not used as part of the data collection, and middle school teachers in one grade level instead of elementary teachers were used as the participants. Bongo's findings revealed common themes from participants' descriptions about caring teacher behaviors: courteous, respectful, interested in students' well-being, encouraging and maintaining positive expectations. Teachers described caring in terms of four major general code "families:"



communicating and connecting with students, being competent in the craft, treating students respectfully and fairly, and compassion for students' successes and high expectations. He analyzed the responses to his second research question regarding the components of Noddings' theory of caring. Of the twelve teachers, all stated that they believed modeling takes place in their classrooms. Most notable within the realm of modeling were codes such as communication, connectedness, compassion, and fairness. Results also indicated that all twelve respondents described dialogue as a possible component of caring. Practice was the most identified component of caring when teachers described their teaching. However, there was not a clear connection made between the differences of practice as a caring component and practice as a means of teaching. Only four teachers actually described confirmation as being connected to caring while others understood it but did not support it in the classroom. The study also raised the question of whether or not caring is something that can be taught.

Cha (2008) explored the diverse perspectives and interpretations of caring by five Korean middle school students and two Caucasian teachers. Data was collected over four months through observations and interviews to answer a question concerning how do teachers' and students' expressions of caring differ by ethnicity and age as well as Noddings' four components of caring. The framework for this study on caring was filtered by a cultural lens, which was a distinct difference from the present study. Cha used interviews, classroom observations, and documents as data. Students' and teachers' perceptions of caring through Noddings' components were looked at through student and teacher behaviors. Both students and teachers referred to the importance of modeling as an essential component of caring. One pattern notably absent was dialogue in the students' responses. Cha explained that Korean students may not view adults as equals to whom they can openly engage in discussion. Korean social hierarchy may also be a

reason for the lack of confirmation responses by the students, as defined by Noddings. The teachers expressed different views on both student and teacher caring. Cha stated that one teacher exhibited three of the four components through the lens of Christianity. The other teacher had responses related to two of the components and seemed to focus on teaching techniques as a way of expressing her care for her students. Cha found that beliefs about caring and caring actions are both necessary in order for a caring relationship to be complete. She found that personal beliefs about caring were shaped by home influences, cultural traditions, and individuality. However, ethnicity was only one factor for determining perspectives on caring in the classroom.

Martin (2009) studied the common beliefs and practices of turnaround teachers, or caring teachers who make a difference in childrens' lives through relationships. Participants were based on recommendations from principals, social workers, counselors and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students who identified teachers in their past experiences who had positively influenced them in some way or who had made a difference in their lives. Unlike my study, the theoretical framework for this study was resilience theory with a strengths-based approach. Through case studies of eight teachers, she found that loving support, high expectations, and opportunities for participation from teachers were protective factors that allowed struggling students to "beat the odds" and make a resilient comeback. Turnaround teachers in this study believed that caring relationships are the most important part of their lives, and in turn, they believed that relationships are the most part of teaching.

In summary, common themes of teachers' caring beliefs, practices, and cultural influences as cited in the studies above include: the importance of teacher caring, respect, positive or high expectations, and fairness or equity for all students. They are grouped below

according to the frequency and relevancy as expressed by the descriptions given by the teachers in the studies on classroom caring.

### **Importance of teacher caring.**

In order to display caring within the context of classrooms, teachers must have a dual focus of presenting the curriculum but also spend significant time and energy on nurturing the needs of each of their students (Collier, 2005). Kainaroi (2005) focused on the relationship between caring teachers and student outcomes, both academic and social-emotional, as a way to promote a caring classroom. Noddings (1984, 1992) presented the importance of teacher caring as a moral obligation and responsibility for the development of a more ethical and caring society. The importance of teacher caring (Buese, 2005; Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Cha, 2008; Martin, 2009; Thompson, 2010) mainly expressed through relationships is an important role of teachers in academic settings. Caring can be demonstrated by various beliefs and practices of teachers but it is a priority that is non-negotiable for academic settings.

### **Positive/high expectations.**

Teachers who believe in themselves and believe in the success of their students can often increase the confidence level and performance of their students (Bernard, 1998). Perspectives about students and especially those “at-risk,” are critical for students to develop a positive sense of themselves in order to succeed in their academic and personal lives (Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Martin, 2009; Thompson, 2010). Studies documenting teachers who take the time to encourage and be positive with their students aligns with Noddings (1984) theory with emphasis on the components of dialogue and confirmation. Noddings (1984) suggests that students will rise to the level expected by teachers (confirmation) who care and have an ongoing dialogue and connection with them. In addition to dialogue and confirmation, relationships that include

ongoing practice (Noddings, 1984) reinforce the teachers' caring and are directly linked to their ability to exhibit high expectations.

### **Fairness/equity.**

Students who consider their teachers to be fair are more comfortable in the classroom and are far more willing to participate and learn (Camak, 2007). Buese (2005) and Thompson (2010) cited the importance of fairness within the classroom management of teachers who must negotiate power and demonstrate equity for all students. Treating each student with the care appropriate just for them corresponds to showing how each student is cared for in an equitable way with the others are in the classroom (Bartley, 2007). Cha (2008) found that caring teachers modeling (Noddings, 1984) fairness to all students regardless of diverse cultural backgrounds was a critical theme to the personal and academic success of students. According to Noddings (1984), being fair and honest builds trust and takes time with a classroom. Camak (2007) makes the point that this is a difficult task and students must believe in the teacher's fairness and return it in kind. Camak's views on fairness as it pertains to caring align with the caring components of modeling and practice (Noddings, 1984).

### **Respect.**

Teachers expect their students to respect them and students want to receive respect from their teachers. In Camak's (2007) study, students felt respected when teachers did not yell at them for a lack of understanding. This relates directly to Noddings (1984) dialogue component of care. Students also define respectful teacher behavior characteristics as: patient (Nieto, 1994) and feeling that the teachers listened to them (Fedderson, 2003). Noddings' (1984) caring components, with the most emphasis on modeling and practice, aligned with the authors who defined respect as a way to show positive regard for students' basic human rights as a person.

Bongo (2011) found that respect is a necessary behavior for teachers who understand caring behaviors toward students in their classroom. For Korean students, Cha (2008) listed mutual respect as being very important to the cultural caring of minority students. Loving and respecting students and getting the same in return was found to be very relevant to caring teachers (Bartley, 2007).

### **Summary**

Although caring beliefs and practices of effective public school teachers play an important role in the process of helping “at-risk” students to become successful, it is difficult to promote educational change as it may require legislative reform. However, practices designed to reduce the obstacles that struggling students face, may encourage other teachers to make use of caring relationships in their classrooms. Thus, understanding how caring relationships, affective teaching, teacher effectiveness, and cultural factors relate to the process of student achievement, can be used to help reduce the achievement gap. As a result, a goal of the present research was to expand on the previous literature by using Noddings’ theory and components of care to examine the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative research is the study of social phenomena. One underlying assumption of qualitative research is that individuals construct their view of reality from interaction in the social world. The qualitative researcher interviews and observes people in their natural social worlds. Merriam (1998) maintains that qualitative research does not test theory but instead uses findings to build theory.

This chapter provides a description of the methods used to collect and analyze data in a qualitative study that explored effective teachers' beliefs and practices regarding caring relationships with their students. Using a multi-case study approach (Stake, 2006), the researcher utilized a survey, semi-structured interviews, and observations to explore the insights and beliefs of six elementary school teachers about how teacher interactions affect student successes. This chapter also addresses an explanation of the chosen research methodology as well as the process of participant selection, data collection and analysis.

#### **Conceptual Framework**

The theory of caring as defined by Noddings (1984) provides a conceptual framework for the present study's investigation of how effective teachers interact with their students in the classroom. Using the theory of caring, this study explored how teachers define, understand, and practice caring toward students in their classrooms and how this is related to Noddings' four components of caring: modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation.+

#### **Research Questions**

The first focus of this study explored effective teachers' beliefs about caring relationships with their students and their practices that demonstrated caring relationships. Particular attention

was given to the relationships of “at-risk” students that have positive student achievement. A second focus investigated the various ways effective teachers’ beliefs and practices of caring may be influenced by the teachers’ cultural backgrounds and/or the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students as indicated by their Title I eligibility.

#### Research Questions:

1. What are effective teachers’ beliefs about caring relationships and interactions with their students, especially with underachieving students?
2. What are effective teachers’ practices that demonstrate caring relationships and interactions with their students, especially with underachieving students?
3. In what ways may effective teachers’ beliefs and practices of caring be influenced by the teachers’ cultural backgrounds and/or the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students as indicated by their Title I eligibility?

#### **Research Design**

“Caring is an attitude and not a specifiable set of behaviors...It does not lend itself to empirical research as conducted by mainstream social scientists” (Pinar, 1981, p. 149). In contrast to the quantitative research of mainstream social scientists, the present study qualitatively examined effective teachers’ perspectives of caring relationships, particularly relationships with “at-risk” students. The researcher utilized a qualitative multi-case study design using a survey, semi-structured interviews, and observations. Previous research has focused on quantitative approaches to help teachers close the achievement gap. Educational reformists mandated this research with little regard to actual experiences of teachers and students in the classroom. This study gave voice to the unheard teachers’ caring beliefs and practices.

In order to provide an in-depth understanding of the caring beliefs and practices of

effective teachers and with students, especially low-achieving students, the researcher collected qualitative data to provide rich, thick descriptions of the interactions and environmental settings. Merriam (2009) asserts that research leading to a better understanding of practice with the intent to improve practice supports the goals of qualitative research. The purpose of data gathered through qualitative purposes is research that is focused on discovering insight and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied. It was crucial for this study to focus on the perspectives of the participants to fully comprehend how teachers make meaning or sense of their lives and experiences in the classroom.

Merriam (2009) explains that qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. This study fulfilled the overall purpose of qualitative research, which is to achieve a better understanding of how people believe and interpret processes that work. As Merriam points out, the case study approach offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance, specifically relationships and belief systems. In my study, the multi-case study design helped with understanding the phenomenon of caring relationships in regard to higher student achievement. As Stake (2006) explains, in multi-case study research, the single case deserves attention because it belongs to a particular collection of cases. The individual cases share a common characteristic. In some way, the cases in the collection are categorically bound together and may be examples of a phenomenon. Each individual case or single entity that is a case example of what is being studied, is a bounded system (Smith, 1978). In the present study, each single teacher was a bounded case of study. Each unit of analysis, not the topic of investigation, characterizes a case study.



Yin (2009) gives reasons for conducting case studies, including situations when variables or behaviors may not be manipulated, and when there is a need to ask why or how. Merriam (2009) added that case studies are also more beneficial when a prediction that is based on purely cause and effect cannot be answered because the variables are difficult to identify. She also stated that case study allows the researcher to view real-life situations with the potential to describe the phenomenon holistically through thick, rich descriptions. Case studies are good for describing and expanding the understanding of a phenomenon and are often used to study people and programs particularly in education (Stake, 2006).

Because phenomena can be peculiar to particular circumstances, multiple case studies may be appropriate. Yin (2009) states that multiple cases can be used to explore the differences between two or more cases giving insight into phenomena. Merriam (2009) maintains that in case studies there may be several examples that can be represented by more than one case. When there is more than one case being studied, each case is first examined alone, and then they are compared with each other for similarities and differences. Merriam believes that when there is more than one case studied, there is a better chance that the outcomes will be more credible. The multiple case study method within the qualitative framework allowed the researcher to deeply investigate the caring beliefs and practices of six effective elementary teachers and observe them interacting with their students.

### **Research Settings**

The central Georgia School System (anonymous name) under study is located in central Georgia and serves approximately 27,500 students. There are 38 schools: 23 elementary, eight middle, six high schools and one alternative school. For the purposes of the proposed study, the research setting is two mid-sized suburban, Title I elementary schools, Appleton Elementary and

Brighton Elementary (pseudonyms), in the central Georgia School System. The Georgia Department of Education has recognized both schools as 2011 Title I Distinguished Schools. These schools have achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) since 2006 under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Title I schools have a significant population of students who are economically disadvantaged and receive federal money to assist with the education of these students. Distinguished schools serve as models for schools with similar demographics that have been identified for improvement. These two school research sites provided an appropriate population sample for exploring the stories of caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers and their educational influence on students at risk of academic failure. Even though all participants in the study teach at two Title I schools, the schools have differences in demographics, sizes and cultural climates.

Appleton Elementary School is located in a small community in the north end of the central Georgia School System. This school serves grades prekindergarten through fifth with a total enrollment of approximately 704 students. The population is broken down in the following manner. There are 377 males and 327 females. In regards to ethnicity and racial makeup, there are 60 Hispanic, one American Indian, four Asian, 209 Black, two Pacific Islander, 392 White, and 36 students of two or more races. Of the approximate 700 students currently enrolled, 70% of them receive free or reduced lunch. There are 46 highly qualified certified teachers on staff, including one instructional coach, two intervention teachers, one teacher of English as a Second Language, two interrelated special education teachers, two emotional behavior disorder teachers, one gifted teacher, three specialists, and 33 homeroom teachers. There is one counselor, one media specialist, and one Speech and Language Pathologist.

Brighton Elementary School is located on the northeastern side of the central Georgia

School System. Brighton Elementary School serves grades prekindergarten through fifth with a total enrollment of approximately 364 students. The population is broken down in the following manner. There are 177 males and 187 females. In regards to ethnicity and racial makeup, there are 50 Hispanic, three American Indian, 14 Asian, 240 Black, two Pacific Islander, 51 White, and 14 students of two or more races. Of the approximate 350 students currently enrolled, 90% of them receive free or reduced lunch. There are 26 highly qualified certified teachers on staff, including one instructional coach, two intervention teachers, one teacher of English as a Second Language, two interrelated special education teachers, two emotional behavior disorder teachers, three specialists, and 17 homeroom teachers. There is one counselor, one media specialist, and one Speech and Language Pathologist.

I chose Title I schools for this research study because the teachers in these schools typically have much more experience with “at-risk” students than teachers in non-Title I schools. I chose Appleton Elementary and Brighton Elementary Schools for two reasons. First, I have worked at both schools as an ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) teacher and still work at Appleton Elementary School so I am familiar with the culture of each school. Second, I have observed a wide range of teacher and student backgrounds at the two schools. Third, they are both distinguished Title I schools.

### **Population and Sample**

Purposive sampling was used to obtain the six participant teachers for the study. According to Merriam (2009), purposive sampling is the most appropriate for qualitative research. She further stated that this type of sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to understand and gain insight so it is necessary to select a sample from which the most can be learned. Using purposive sampling, I determined the sample of teachers by

developing selection criteria. The criteria for inclusion in this study included the following: A teacher from either Appleton Elementary or Brighton Elementary School, nominated by other teachers as most effective in supporting student learning and overall student success in their school, and representative of diverse cultural backgrounds. Please see Table 1 below for a brief description of the top nominations from the two schools. All six participants were female, elementary school regular education classroom teachers. Pseudonym names were given to all teacher participants and names mentioned in teachers' responses.

Table 1

*Description of Teacher Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Subjects</b>
Mrs. Sperry	5 <sup>th</sup>	White	Appleton Elementary School	31	Math, Science, Social Studies
Mrs. Shay	5 <sup>th</sup>	White	Appleton Elementary School	17	Language Arts
Mrs. Burnes	5 <sup>th</sup>	White	Brighton Elementary School	5	Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies
Mrs. Kendrick	3 <sup>rd</sup>	African-American	Appleton Elementary School	10	Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies
Mrs. Moreland	3 <sup>rd</sup>	White	Appleton Elementary School	8	Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies
Mrs. Freidman	1 <sup>st</sup>	White	Brighton Elementary School	31	Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies

Flick (2008) states that in qualitative research, sampling is not formal or random because the sample needs to be representative not in a statistical way, but in a way that fully represents the phenomenon the researcher wishes to study. Merriam (1998) acknowledged that case studies often use purposive sampling because they are information rich. Using case study methodology enables exploration of the phenomena in which the researcher is interested. Patton (2002) stated that the intention of purposeful sampling is not for generalization. It is however for in-depth understanding of a particular situation. Merriam further stated that random sampling for probability purposes is not necessary because generalization is not a goal of qualitative research; rather, the goal is to gain a further understanding of the phenomena being studied. Thus, use of purposive sampling is appropriate for this study so the researcher can learn as much as possible about the phenomena.

Teacher commonalities were limited to only those characteristics indicated on the nomination surveys. Seidman (2006) stated there are two criteria that should be followed in order to ensure that there are enough participants in a study: sufficiency and the amount of information presented. The number of teachers that participated in the study was small, but they were considered as a whole and may have experienced similar social experiences. Patton (2002) asserts that a small case sample is sufficient for a qualitative case study if the cases can provide an abundance of information.

### **Data Collection**

For data collection, the study used qualitative research methods including a survey, interviews, and observations to address the research questions. Using different sources of evidence is one of the strengths of data collection in case studies (Yin, 2009). This combination of data sources allows for triangulation that can increase the validity of the study (Merriam,

2002; Yin, 2009). The aim of this research was to provide an examination of beliefs and practices that caring theorists suggest as being helpful to teachers supporting the achievement of “at-risk” students. This approach shifts the conversation about students struggling with achievement from those outside of the classroom to the teachers’ own perspectives, which was a crucial goal of this study. Although this research is emergent in nature, a general plan guided the data collection process. Table 2 outlines the information needed and how I obtained the data for my research questions.

Table 2

*Data and Methods Needed to Address Research Questions*

Research Questions	Information Needed	Method of Inquiry
1. What are effective teachers’ beliefs about caring relationships and interactions with their students, especially with underachieving students?	Participants’ perceptions as to how they (teachers) define and understand caring toward students within their own classrooms.	Survey Interview Observation
2. What are effective teachers’ practices that demonstrate caring relationships and interactions with their students, especially with underachieving students?	Participants’ perceptions as to how they (teachers) practice caring toward students within their own classrooms.	Survey Interview Observation
3. In what ways may effective teachers’ beliefs and practices of caring be influenced by the teachers’ cultural backgrounds and/or the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students as indicated by their Title I eligibility?	Participants’ perceptions as to what ways they (teachers) believe and practice caring toward students within their own classrooms is influenced by their backgrounds and/or the socioeconomic backgrounds of the students.	Survey Interview Observation

**Sources of data.**

Survey questionnaires (see Appendix A) provided the data needed for selecting participants in the study at each school and gave opportunities for the survey respondents to give reasons why they nominated particular teachers. The key mode of data collection was semi-structured interviews that followed an interview protocol (Appendix B) with six teachers. Guided observations within the classrooms of the six participant teachers using an observation protocol (see Appendix C) allowed the researcher to add data regarding caring practices.

***Survey questionnaires.***

The first aim of the survey (see Appendix A) was to identify effective teachers. The faculty and staff members of each school used the survey to nominate fellow teachers or colleagues as effective teachers. Identifying effective teachers through nominations was based on the idea that staff members and teachers are in the best position to designate effective teachers in their school. Objective measures, specifically standardized test scores, are not indicators of all that encompasses the idea of effective teaching (Doll & Lyon, 1998; Holleran & Waller, 2003).

The survey consisted of two sections. The first section gave the survey respondent an opportunity to name four teachers who they thought were supportive of student learning as well as overall student success at their school. The second section was open-ended and asked the survey respondent to give more information about what makes the identified teachers effective. The surveys provided a list of effective teachers and the frequency of their nominations at each school. Within these lists, priority was given to highly nominated teachers with a secondary concern of providing a diverse sample of teachers. Teacher participants helped with answering all the research questions and provided a diverse set of teachers for answering the third research question. Therefore, the number of nominations from the survey and the teachers' cultural

backgrounds were both used as criteria to select the participants.

Secondly, the survey provided information about possible characteristics and actions of teachers demonstrating caring relationships and interactions with their students. On the survey questionnaire, the respondents answered an open-ended question that explained what makes the nominated teachers effective. Consistencies between respondent survey explanations listing actions or characteristics of nominated teacher practices were noted on the observation protocol.

Data from staff nominations at each school were tallied according to the frequency of votes per teacher. Participants were selected based on the highest frequency of votes with a secondary concern of providing a diverse sample of teachers. In the original proposed study, four teachers were to be selected from each school for a total of six participants. After multiple attempts at Elementary B, 40 percent of the surveys were returned which only provided 14 surveys due to the small staff size. The results clearly showed two teachers with a higher rate of nomination frequency and all of the other nominated teachers had only one to three votes each. In order to preserve the intention of purposeful sampling, I decided to only use the two highly nominated teachers as participants from Brighton Elementary School for representation that could offer in-depth understanding to the study. Appleton Elementary School has a much larger staff and had a survey return rate of 90 percent with four highly nominated teachers and therefore provided four participants for the study.

### ***Interviews.***

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews (Appendix B) were the main source of data collection for this study. Interviews took place in the natural setting of one of the two schools. The interviews were especially helpful to the researcher for answering the first and third research questions: *What are effective teachers' beliefs about caring relationships and interactions with*



*their students, especially with underachieving students? In what ways may effective teachers' beliefs and practices of caring be influenced by the teachers' cultural backgrounds and/or the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students as indicated by their Title I eligibility?*

A pilot interview was conducted prior to the study in order to determine if revisions were necessary for the planned interview protocol. The teacher selected for the pilot interview was not a participant in the study. The interview questions were open-ended to allow for individual variations and follow-up probing questions. Also, the researcher was free to explore related areas when needed. This method allowed teachers to discuss and give examples of approaches they have employed that have made an impact on student achievement. According to Seidman (2006), an interview has the potential to become a powerful way to gain insight. The researcher can understand the experiences of individuals because humans use language and speaking to make meaning of their lives. "Each case will tell its own story" (Stake, 1994, p. 239).

Merriam (1998) believes that interviews are important because the researcher cannot observe feelings or how people observe their own world. Marshall and Rossman (2006) further add that qualitative open-ended interviews are more like conversations than other interviews with categories of responses that are already determined previously. They state it is the participant who guides the interview process with the researcher maintaining the structure of the interview and providing support with a few guiding questions. Patton (2002) explains that in qualitative interviewing, quotations are often used to explain an individual's experiences with their world, their opinions about different topics, and their knowledge. These direct quotations can uncover emotional responses to the topic as well as each participant's thoughts and the approaches in which they view their surroundings.

The study's semi-structured interview format utilized an interview guide to help steer the interview into the right direction to stay generally close to the topic at hand. Merriam (1998) states that the exact wording of interviews is not determined beforehand, however, the basic interview questions are predetermined. Allowing the participants the freedom to answer the interview questions as they chose enabled the interviewer to follow up appropriately to the participants and to any new ideas or topics that may arise. Interviews were conducted one-on-one with the researcher to ensure confidentiality and maintained the comfort levels of each participant, ensuring their privacy. The one-to-one format also allowed each participant to express their personal views about caring beliefs and practices concerning student achievement. Yin (2009) makes the point that although interviews may be biased due to researcher opinions, they enable the researcher to focus on the specific topic being studied.

Merriam (1998) suggests the researcher keep the interview atmosphere "respectful, nonjudgmental, and nonthreatening" (p. 85) so that participants will be able to feel comfortable to share their stories. The interviews were conducted in a quiet place that was conducive to individual interviews. The location was dependent upon availability at each school and the comfort level of each participant. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes and allowed flexibility for extended time.

Before each interview began, participants were reminded that their participation was strictly voluntary and of their option to end the interview at any time and their right to ask questions. Teachers were interviewed and audio recorded utilizing the interview protocol.

The interview protocol consisted of questions created from a variety of related research literature to support the study questions on the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers.

The interview protocol was divided into three sections and the section titles were: Beliefs, Practices and Beliefs/Practices/Influences. Beliefs, Practices, and Beliefs/Practices/Influences represent the three research questions as broad categories of questions on the Interview Protocol. Under the first heading, Beliefs, there were thirteen questions concerning caring, teacher-student relationships, and student success or achievement. The next section titled Practices, had nine questions about possible characteristics of caring teachers or what caring teacher-student relationships might look like in a classroom. The last section, Beliefs/Practices/Influences was a collection of fourteen questions regarding influences such as educational reform, culture, and backgrounds on teachers and their students and how they affect their relationship.

### ***Observations.***

Teacher interviews were supplemented with classroom observations. The observations allowed the researcher to effectively answer the second research question, *What are effective teachers' practices that demonstrate caring relationships and interactions with their students, especially with underachieving students?* The observations allowed the researcher to observe how teachers exhibit caring practices and how students respond to these practices. Another important reason for observation of the classes, allowed the researcher to look at the non-instructional actions among the teachers and students that cannot be explained through interviews. Observations gave a clear picture of the environment and behaviors of the teachers in their classrooms with students. The researcher did not have to have preconceived notions of what was studied; all he or she needed to do was to be open-minded and accept what is going on around them. However, Merriam (1998) addresses the need for the researcher to be aware of the changes that the researcher's presence has on the participants. Yin (1994) clarifies this awareness by asking the researcher why events are occurring and keep in mind that those events may be

occurring only due to the researcher's presence. It was stated in Yin (1994) that although events may be different if the researcher was not there, observations can be an important way to view insights into behavior and motivation.

An observation protocol (See Appendix C) was used to help document the extent to which the caring practices of the teachers occurred and provided standardization to the data collection process. The observation protocol used the format of a tally chart for clarity and standardization. Blank spaces provided for the characteristics or actions observed and the frequency noted by tally marks. Further space was available for descriptions or comments. Emergent themes consistent among the six interviews were added to the observation protocol to help with identifying commonalities.

After each teacher observation, it was necessary to adapt and include each new observed characteristic or action on the following the protocol for the remaining observation sessions. Thus, the protocol was customized to fit the needs of the study. Each teacher was formally observed a minimum of forty-five minutes. As a teacher-researcher who has worked in both schools, I was already informally familiar with the teaching practices of four of the study's participants.

### **Research Procedures**

The Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures and policies as well as the local Board of Education requirements, were followed and all necessary permissions obtained. Permission to conduct the proposed study was obtained from the central Georgia School System, which included permission letters from Appleton Elementary School and Brighton Elementary School. Following approval of the prospectus, approval was obtained from the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board. The survey was given to all

teachers at each school on a day determined by the principal.

Surveys were personally delivered and collected from both schools. Printed-paper surveys were completed at staff meetings in order to provide teachers with non-instructional time to complete the surveys. Anonymity was maintained by collecting surveys in an envelope. Certified staff members including homeroom teachers, administrators, counselors, and support teachers nominated four teachers they considered to be effective and gave reasons for their nominations. Selected teachers were contacted by email or personal contact and asked for permission to be interviewed and observed for the research study. Participation in this study was voluntary and all participants had the option of ending their participation in the study at any time without any risk or harm to them. Written consent was obtained from each individual participant before data collection as required by Georgia Southern University.

Each interview and observation took place at each teacher's individual school during the school day. The researcher attempted to provide maximum flexibility in scheduling the interviews and observations to accommodate the participants. The researcher communicated with the teachers through email, personal contact, or phone to confirm the date, place, and time of the interviews and observations. Interviews were between 60 and 90 minutes and observations were a minimum of 45 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

The preferred way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection (Merriam, 2009). In other words, the researcher begins data analysis with the first set of collected data instead of waiting until the end of the data collection. However, data analysis does not end until all data had been collected and compared to confirm or disconfirm emergent themes. Merriam further describes the *constant comparative method* of data analysis,

which was utilized in the present study, as the comparison of one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences. The overall objective of this analysis was to identify patterns in the data arranged by relationships to each other. In this study, these steps were followed to make sense of the collected data.

**Step one: Nomination survey examinations.**

Nomination surveys from each school were the first data set and were reviewed individually with the purpose of the study in mind. The data from the surveys were read in order to make notes capturing reflections, ideas, hunches, tentative themes, and things to pursue in future data collections. I noted things to ask, observe, or look for in future data collections. Each survey was compared to the surveys read earlier by the researcher. The survey responses were grouped into tentative themes related to the three research questions (caring beliefs, caring practices, and caring influences) and typed into a Microsoft Word document.

**Step two: Reflective writing after interviews.**

In this study, the second source of data was teacher interviews. I followed the same process of allowing each interview to be compared and contrasted to the ones collected earlier. After the interviews, preliminary notes and reflective memos were written to record my initial impressions and participants' meanings of the interview responses. I listened to the recorded interviews and wrote additional reflective memos in addition to reading my written notes. The memos helped with topics that required clarification or further thinking and understanding.

**Step three: Transcriptions of teachers' interviews.**

Transcription was the conversion of spoken words into written and comprehensible language. Interviews were transcribed verbatim manually into a Word document by the researcher using the digital recordings and a transcription headset. This was followed by a

review of the electronic transcripts to compare with the digital recordings to ensure accuracy. I used a digital recorder for interviews and software for help in personally transcribing into a computer. The interviews were electronically transcribed into a Microsoft Word document on a password-protected computer of the researcher. Each interview was processed separately giving each participant separate file names so they would not be easily confused. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were shared with the interviewee via email for review and to make sure the transcriptions accurately represent what was intended, which is called member checking. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend member checking for credibility and trustworthiness. To maintain confidentiality, each interviewee only received the transcript that pertained to them. Any information that was not correct or that the participant did not want to be shared was corrected or omitted.

**Step four: Observation examinations.**

Observation protocols were the third data set and were reviewed individually by the researcher with the purpose of the study in mind. The data from the observations was retyped exactly as the written description on the observation protocol from the time of the actual observation. Each observation was compared to the observations read earlier by the researcher. The characteristics or actions from the observation protocol were grouped into tentative themes and typed into a Microsoft Word document.

**Step five: Developing preliminary codes.**

Once the data from the surveys, interviews, and observations were collected and necessary transcriptions made, the next step was to develop preliminary codes. I highlighted and circled what stood out the most to me in the transcripts and Word documents. I wrote memos to conceptualize my thoughts and developed preliminary codes. Once the themes emerged from the

relationships between the data, categories were created which summarized and gave meaning to the transcripts. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2009) was consulted to assist the researcher with the code generating during the data analysis process. Saldana (2009) reports that the assigning of codes can help the research process and the overall organization of data because each assigned code will enable themes to be created and more easily identified. Saldana (2009) also mentions some necessary characteristics researchers should engage in while coding. This includes being organized, dealing with the vagueness of the different responses and codes, being flexible and creative, treating each participant and their responses with the utmost respect, and keeping an open mind so that all themes and categories can emerge.

Codes were identified using a color-coding system, which included words, sentences and phrases that provided the keys to answering the research questions. The codes were then organized in a codebook to identify the specific themes in the text. Each group of texts were also marked to assign codes, and themes emerged because of the careful reading of each line of the text while looking for any processes, relationships, actions, and the consequences of those actions.

#### **Step six: Categories.**

Codes and possible themes were used to create categories by organizing and identifying key relationships to the research questions. After reflecting on all the transcribed interviews, survey documents, and observation documents, I grouped the data into the broad topics of the research questions—beliefs, practices, and influences—for further analysis. First, I analyzed and categorized the data from the first interview. Each subsequent interview was analyzed and combined with the data already categorized.



**Step seven: Themes.**

As themes and sub-themes emerged from the data, I completed the cross-case analysis comparing themes and other findings that cut across the interviews and documents. Themes were derived from shared commonalities within and across case studies.

**Validity**

As a researcher conducting a qualitative study in the district in which I am employed, validity was a question of concern. Lincoln & Guba (1985) proposed four criteria—credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability—for judging the soundness of qualitative research as an alternative to more traditional quantitatively-oriented criteria. Credibility involves establishing that the results of the research are credible from the perspective of the participants. Transferability refers to the degree to which the results can be generalized or transferred to other settings. Dependability emphasizes the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context in which the research occurs. Confirmability is the degree to which others verify the results.

In a study like mine, I was concerned with the possibility of results being biased or inconsistent with what I wanted to measure. A topic such as “caring” can produce subjective or ambiguous data. I wanted to be sure that I collected and interpreted fairly and accurately from the teachers. Therefore, attention was given to credibility and confirmability to help with the validity of my study.

**Credibility**

Since the purpose of my study was to describe or understand caring from the participants’ perspectives, the participants were the only ones who could legitimately judge the credibility of the results. Member checks, or showing research material to the people on whom the research

was done is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants can indicate their agreement or disagreement with the way the researcher has represented them. For member checks, I allowed the teachers to read and review my transcripts and observations of them to make any corrections or additions deemed necessary to accurately represent their views. It was crucial for this particular study that the participants agreed with the data results from the study.

### **Confirmability**

As the researcher, I brought a unique perspective to my study, which could cause bias or distortion of the data collection or analysis. If the results of my study needed to be confirmed by others, interpretive validity (Bongo, 2011) was helpful in producing unbiased and consistent results. Interpretive validity is the degree that the participants' viewpoints, thoughts, intentions, and experiences are accurately understood and reported by the researcher. I used the strategy of reflexivity and actively engaged in critical self-reflections about my biases or predispositions. I attempted to control and monitor my biases by writing memos to myself to stay aware of my own assumptions. I documented the procedures for checking and rechecking the data throughout the study leaving a "paper trail" of my actions. I also actively searched for and described any negative instances that contradicted prior observations. Ongoing feedback from my academic advisor also helped me with data analysis.

For triangulation, the data was examined for similarities within each teacher across the survey, interview, and observations. In other words, the researcher determined, for each teacher, if nominators' descriptions of the teacher, the teacher's self-report (via the interview), and researcher's observation were consistent. The greatest emphasis was placed on the consistency between the teachers' self-reports about caring and the researcher's observations of the teachers'

caring. The researcher qualitatively determined to what extent each teacher actually did what she reported to do.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

One assumption of the researcher was the method of identifying effective teachers. Identifying effective teachers through nominations was based on the idea that staff members and teachers were able to accurately designate effective teachers in their school. Another assumption was that the interviewed teachers were aware of their own caring beliefs and practices and were able to articulate these beliefs and practices sufficiently.

A limitation to the multi-case study was that because of the small number of teachers, findings cannot be generalized to all teachers. Another limitation was that the influences on caring beliefs and practices related to cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds were limited to the backgrounds of the participants and their students in the study.

### **Summary**

This chapter discussed the specific research methodology that was used in this qualitative case study. The purpose of this study was to identify the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers and to determine if these beliefs and practices may be influenced by cultural or socioeconomic factors. Six teachers in the central Georgia area at two different Title I Elementary Schools participate in this study. The research design, population, sample, data collection methods and procedures, and data analysis were described in detail. Furthermore, the rationale for implementing the multiple-case study framework was presented.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to identify the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers and also to determine if these beliefs and practices may be influenced by cultural or socioeconomic factors. This was done by exploring the way in which effective teachers described and explained how caring took place within their classrooms. In addition, observations were conducted to see how the teachers interacted with their students, which provided opportunities for noting consistencies between interviews and observations.

As noted earlier, this study was limited to two Title I elementary schools in central Georgia. The findings in this chapter explored the descriptions, responses, observations and collective themes that emerged from the six participants in the study. I briefly summarize the results of the nomination process and give some background information about the teachers before sharing the findings.

The survey for nominating teachers specifically asked that teachers be nominated for their overall support of students, which included their effectiveness with student learning (see Survey Questionnaire, Appendix A). According to the survey, each teacher participant was nominated for being most effective in helping students, especially underachieving students, to turn their lives around and improve their achievement in school.

After tallying the teacher nominations, I grouped each school's survey responses into tentative initial themes. In the survey, the most identified reason teachers nominated the study participants for being effective teachers was how their time was spent in the classroom. Specifically, using time effectively with students and creating optimal learning opportunities was the most frequent nomination reason given by survey respondents. Further clarification was given for effective use of time by recognizing three areas: building relationships, meeting academic needs, and preparing lessons. Separately, each one of these sub-themes of effective use of time in the

classroom along with personal and individual attention were the four nomination themes cited in the survey.

Cross-case analysis of the six teachers' interviews revealed four recurrent themes. Each theme was labeled as follows: broad view of effective teaching, teacher efficacy beliefs, students as unique individuals within social contexts, and teachers as caring mentors. The nomination themes of building relationships, meeting academic needs, creating engaging lessons, and individual attention were consistent with three of the four themes described by the teacher participants in the study. The nomination theme of taking the time to build relationships with students is the very core of caring relationships when teachers put themselves in situations to support and encourage students. In addition, a sub-theme of teachers as caring mentors from the study—caring as an academic motivator—was also a nomination theme from the survey. Engaging lessons, a fundamental teacher responsibility identified as a nomination theme, is a sub-theme of student-centered teaching practices under the study theme of broad view of effective teaching. Personal and individual attention recognized as a theme from the nomination survey was also one of the four study themes, students as unique individuals within social contexts. This is the ability of teachers to frequently take the time to focus on the well-being of one student. Therefore, all the four nomination themes: building relationships, meeting academic needs, creating engaging lessons, and individual attention were embedded within themes found in the study.

Each theme from the study is addressed separately in the section to follow. See *Figure 1* below for an outline of the four major themes and their sub-themes.

*Figure 1: Outlined Themes and Sub-Themes of Nominated Effective Teachers*

- I. Broad View of Effective Teaching
  - A. Student-centered teaching practices
    1. Sense of classroom community
    2. Engaging lessons
    3. Building student confidence
    4. High teacher expectations
    5. Active student engagement
  - B. Positive student relationship strategies
    1. Teacher humor
    2. Personal sharing
    3. Helping students during times of crisis
    4. Finding the good in students
    5. Getting help for students
  
- II. Teacher Efficacy Beliefs
  - A. All students can learn
  - B. Success for all students
    1. School success
    2. Life success
  - C. Humanistic teacher values
    1. Education can empower
    2. Responsibility to the whole child
  - D. Mixed feelings about educational reforms
  
- III. Students as Unique Individuals within Social Contexts
  - A. Individual instruction
  - B. Individual and social influences
    1. Individual influences on teachers
    2. Cultures of students and teachers
    3. Diverse backgrounds of students and teachers
    4. Socioeconomic influences
  
- IV. Teachers as Caring Mentors
  - A. Importance of Caring
    1. Caring as an academic motivator
    2. Caring for emotional needs and life skills
  - B. Caring relationships
    1. Reaching hard to reach students
    2. Teachers as parental figures
  - C. Universal caring
  - D. Caring supports achievement

To facilitate the presentation of a large amount of qualitative data, the thematic findings are organized and labeled according to this outline. A few sections contain some of the teachers' entire responses to provide unspoiled voices from their stories. A broad view of effective teaching practices was well recognized by the six research participants. These practices are described in the following section.

### **I. Broad View of Effective Teaching**

The beginning of this section is devoted to analyzing and showing the teachers' responses to the first question on the interview survey concerning what made them an effective teacher. Their personal answers to this question revealed key insights about their perceptions of what made them effective teachers. The teachers shared a broad view of effectiveness that encompassed both "technical expertise" in delivery subject matter and "expressive relationships" that supported student learning (Prillaman, Eaker, & Kendrick, 1994). Moreover, they felt that "expressive relationships" made a critical difference in the willingness of underachievers to achieve.

First, the majority of responses could be grouped into a large category concerning "expressive" ways that the teachers treated their students. Teachers identified using humor, showing compassion, not judging, accepting imperfections, making their students feel comfortable, better or successful, listening, talking, and building relationships as ways that make them effective teachers. All of these interactions were incorporated into taking the time to develop student-centered relationships. Secondly, the teachers recognized certain things about their students such as finding strengths to build confidence and using areas of motivation for addressing academic needs. Lastly, they put into action their beliefs such as, all students can

achieve, by pushing students to try harder to become independent learners. Below are the teachers' full responses to question, "What do you think makes you an effective teacher with students, especially underachieving students?"

Mrs. Shay:

I guess the belief that all students can achieve, even underachieving students... and then holding those students accountable. Along with that, I would say gradual release of independence. Then the whole idea of that comfortable factor, them feeling comfortable with me, and in the classroom you know... a risk taker to be able to make mistakes, you know, cause a lot of the time the underachievers do make mistakes.

Mrs. Sperry:

Well, I think the most important is build a relationship with them and that starts from the very beginning through our Open House, you know, the phone calls we make before school, meeting and greeting them, and then after building that relationship, finding their strengths and weaknesses so I can build on their strengths to make them feel confident.

Mrs. Burnes:

I think what makes me effective is that I form a relationship with them. I think they see that and I talk very matter of fact with them. But they also know that I care so they listen. I use a lot of humor in the classroom while I'm doing a lot of talking so a lot of times they don't have time to misbehave because they're listening for the next joke I'm gonna make. I think humor and just forming those relationships, because if you don't have that relationship with the students, then I don't think you can be effective.



Mrs. Kendrick:

One thing that makes me an effective teacher... well things have changed over the years. At first I thought it was making sure all your ducks are in a row but eventually... taught me that being compassionate to the students and their parents, don't judge them, accept their imperfections, and help them grow from there.

Mrs. Moreland:

I believe when it comes to underachieving students you've got to find an area that motivates them and so when being an effective teacher is... first seeking that tool of motivation and then putting that to practice with the area they need to work on and they need to be more successful at, so like motivation would be put to practice with their academic need or weakness.

Mrs. Freidman:

I think it's as simple as saying good morning to them when they walk in. You have a few words with them. You ask about their night, and that sets you up for success because you can kinda tell how they're going to go, whether they've had a rough night the night before. Then you can bring them and make them feel better, even by just a hug or just a pat on the back, we'll talk later if you want to. Listening, I think is important. I also think that wait time, giving them some wait time. You always have those that raise their hand and shout out the answer and it's like no! I don't do that. After you think about it and you know the answer put your thumb up, don't talk. By asking questions and directing them in some way if they are answering a question and you see them going off in a tangent. You can guide them back so they feel like they've answered the question. They have some guidance. Making them feel successful if there's something they think they can't do and

then you showing them or just saying try it. Then you can work on the feedback until they get to the point they can master it.

After the initial interview response narratives, two different facets of effective teaching were explored: student-centered teaching practices and positive student relationship strategies. The interview protocol included questions about teachers' instructional practices. Their description of student-centered teaching practices emerged as they were asked about strategies aimed at helping underachievers. Classroom observations also helped to identify and document these practices and strategies.

### **A. Student-centered teaching practices.**

Student-centered teaching practices can generally be defined as instructional techniques focusing on student growth and understanding. Five categories emerged during the analysis of teacher interviews that added meaning and depth to the idea of student-centered teaching practices. They included: (1) providing a sense of classroom community, (2) delivering engaging lessons, (3) building student confidence, (4) having high teacher expectations and (5) employing active student engagement.

#### ***1. Sense of classroom community.***

Teachers in this study had diverse classrooms and found it necessary to meet the needs of each student by creating some type of common ground. Most of the participants felt that it was vital to provide an emotional environment that was positive, safe, and supportive. They felt this environment of community was just as necessary as the academic or physical environment. Four of the participants frequently mentioned a sense of classroom community as a necessary part of

their instructional day. Mrs. Moreland explains how her role as the teacher is pivotal for building caring relationships through class community:

I think that one of the most important things in the classroom is the classroom community, having a sense of community between the student and teacher as well as the students with one another. I just think that one of the biggest foundations of that is letting them know that I care about each one of them and build relationships with them. Then they can model the practices that I've put forth between teacher and student to being able to build that between student and student. I think it just helps to build that safe environment for students to be able to trust me and to understand that I have their best interest in mind. I'm just here as a support and help to guide them in their education.

During my observation in Mrs. Moreland's room, I observed many references of classroom community when she spoke to the students as a whole. She included herself in the learning process right along with her students by stating things like, "Our job is to learn...we are learning...and we're going to..." She promoted classroom community by letting students know that it was a risk-free, safe environment for new learning by saying, "As you practice to become essayists..." Another example was when Mrs. Moreland told a small group working on word sorts, "Do what I do, then we'll do it together." Another instance showed that Mrs. Moreland wanted students to know that they would not be in trouble for borrowing one of her books. A student needed a particular book from Mrs. Moreland's mentor text shelf and she asked if anyone had seen it. She told the class, "Its okay if you have it, I just need to know."

She also believed that it was easy for caring teachers to show their students how they will be a helper for them no matter what, and this belief should be practiced by caring teachers. Being sensitive to cultural diversity helps build community in her classroom:

Letting their culture being a positive thing in the classroom... you know, thinking back on classroom community, allowing them to even teach others, encouraging them to make the personal connections that they have to certain lessons and allowing them to express their views and their opinions which generally a lot of times will include their culture.

Mrs. Freidman asserted that community at school is very important because students can see commonalities in each other that promote social bonding. She explained how this happens:

I ask a lot of questions and some of them say, "Oh! I do that too!" That's how we build community. If we have community, then we got it all, we got it all! Finding out their background helps you build community and if you have community then you have everything.

One very big piece of evidence that Mrs. Freidman believed community was vital in her classroom was shown in the message scrolling on the computers in the back of the room in screen saver mode when I observed in her room. The message read in very large letters: "LOVE YA! MEAN IT! REALLY!" When she spoke to different table groups or individuals during Reader's Workshop, her comments showed that she was promoting unity within the classroom. Once she told a student, "I'm going to help you with that," and told two other students to "be sweet to each other." Twice she showed her disapproval of inappropriate behavior by saying, "You're bothering me," and "That's hurting me." For Mrs. Shay, teachers' caring relationships with their students promote classroom community:

Risk-takers who are probably talkative realize if they answer and they're not right then that's okay. I guess that's being a risk-taker you know. They feel free to ask questions. They care about others in the classroom. They care about you. Good manners come out

because you're respectful to them. They want to be respectful to you. You accept a risk-taker. You encourage a risk-taker. You encourage community in your classroom.

She also commented that when people feel valued about who they are, it makes the classroom "more homey." While I was observing in Mrs. Shay's room, I noticed that she did something that I observed in all six classrooms. She called a student's name who was off-task to get his or her attention like, "For some of us, Emily, we....and almost all of us, Karen..." Mrs. Shay, like other teachers in the study, was bringing her students back into focus without reprimanding them personally about not listening. She did not skip a beat with her teaching point and by inserting their names into her instructional message, the students knew that they needed to pay attention. This is the same technique that I observed in all five of the other teachers' classrooms. Also, I saw that her choice of words like, "we" and "all of us" shows the students that she puts herself in the same category with them as learners.

Mrs. Sperry highlighted the fact that just being in her classroom automatically creates a sense of community open to all students just because they have been assigned to her. She also commented that it is important to be sensitive to students' cultural differences in her classroom community:

Well, I think just because they come in my classroom, I care for each one of them just because they are part of room 307 that year. I'm not sure that it changes just because they're African American or Hispanic or another cultural group. I do know that I have to attempt to become aware of what those cultural differences might be so I can meet their needs, be flexible... but I don't know that I care for them in any different ways besides being sensitive to what those cultural differences might be.

## *2. Engaging lessons.*

Lessons are the heart of every teacher's daily responsibilities. It is through teachers' lessons that students grasp understanding and make meaning of content. Mrs. Shay thought that students perceive teachers as caring if the teachers showed that they cared about the instructional environment:

I think if you ask them, they would say that I'm strict. I have high expectations but at the same time they would say that I definitely care about them and about their achievement. Because you know, I think a well-run classroom behavior wise, a well-run classroom time-wise, a well-run classroom with good standards... that helps let them know you care about them their achievement. You know when you walk in everyday and you're ready and you're organized and you have lessons that are prepared and you're not fumbling around, they know you care about their achievement.

During my observation in Mrs. Shay's room, I observed signs of a well-run classroom with a positive environment. Mrs. Shay seemed very prepared and I did not see a moment wasted by her or the students. She guided the students seamlessly from the carpet to their book clubs to their groups or seats. Once she repeated herself several times saying "Portraits and Settings" walking around the room to get students to find the page in their journals with that title until everyone got there. Charts from previous lessons were all around the room and she charted out her teaching point. She made comments at the end of the mini-lesson encouraging self-directed learning like, "I want to challenge you to hold yourselves accountable," and "You've got to be proud." Mrs. Shay asked open-ended questions like, "How's it going?" to allow students to feel comfortable expressing any topic. She also gave honest, sincere feedback without pinpointing

struggles to individual students such as, “That’s tricky,” “I’m noticing that...,” or “We kind of forget...”

Being prepared for class is also what Mrs. Burnes said teachers should do to show that they care for their students:

Invest time and resources in them, in the students, and in the lessons that you prepare, in your lesson planning, in planning your curriculum. Every student should come to your mind at some point during your lesson planning. Make sure that you do have a part in there, in every lesson that caters to every learning style in your classroom.

At the beginning of my observation in Mrs. Burnes’ room, she gave students the chance to help her teach the lesson. She asked several students to restate what she had just discussed and other students were asked to add on to their statements. When she passed out the choice boards for a new project, she told her students to “Be creative, thorough, and serious.” Those same exact words: creative, thorough and serious, are included on the instructions for the choice boards. Mrs. Burnes also promoted independence by telling the students she was not going to work out problems for them. Students had to decide among themselves about who should get priority on creating PowerPoint slides since there were only three classroom computers.

Mrs. Sperry used time management techniques to benefit her students. When I observed in her room, she had just returned from lunch and should have been moving on to a new subject according to her schedule, but wanted to allow her students extra time on their math test. This was probably very helpful to the struggling students in her class, especially since she is a special education inclusion teacher. She also gave a warning of six minutes to come to a “good place to stop,” which is a helpful signal so students can focus efforts in a beneficial way. Later, when

they were doing a math maintenance activity, she counted down while giving directions, “One minute left, get your thinking down...look at what you have, 30 seconds...”

During my observation, I saw Mrs. Moreland tell her students that they will meet a new learning goal on the very first day a new writing unit was being launched. She said, “You are going to become an essayist, a really big writer!” She spoke in a very positive and encouraging way showing a lot of emotion. She also spoke about how today’s work would connect with next week’s lessons and then used earlier lessons to help them feel prepared, Mrs. Moreland stated, “I will tell you, you already know...” while she pointed first to her head to emphasize past learning and then to a chart from the previous workshops.

### ***3. Building student confidence.***

All the teachers in the study spoke of working with students’ strengths to help tackle areas of academic weakness. It is sometimes difficult for students to feel like they can do well or be successful in weak areas. However, several teachers specifically shared building confidence as a technique to be used with students, especially underachieving students. It is an approach that worked well in caring relationships according to Mrs. Shay:

I think students doubt themselves every day. I think wait time is a great example of how you didn’t doubt their capabilities. You didn’t give up. You didn’t go on to the next person and you kind of waited. You might do a voice over. You might just give them a hint or an example... but you wait for them to respond. So that’s a specific example of how I might have believed in their capabilities when they doubted themselves. I think you try to brag more or look deeper for a brag. I think those kids with maybe a little bit of a struggle or have a little bit of a wounded spirit... you have to go in it a little bit, not so



in their face but behind the scenes to think about their struggles. You know just walk by and give 'em a nice pat on the back, a thumbs up, just really trying to make them feel valued. I guess kids that don't struggle, they already feel confident... trying to make them confident and just to literally let them know thank you for being here today.

When I was observing Mrs. Shay individually conferencing with students during Reader's Workshop, she encouraged them to make attempts by saying things like, "Give it a go!" and "I don't sound perfect either." She was listening to their fluency and once told the class, "We're going to be rock stars! I want to listen to you be a rock star!" Mrs. Sperry also saw caring teachers as confidence builders:

I think it's going to motivate them to work hard if they think that you are there for them and you care for them. Then they're going to work hard and hopefully want that success as much as I want that success for them. The underachieving students, the success doesn't always come easily for them and so any little bit of success that you can get them to have is gonna make them feel better about themselves. They need to feel important. I think they need to feel like they can achieve and that they do contribute to the classroom even though it might be something so small but they're making a contribution.

As an observer in Mrs. Sperry's room, I saw her build student confidence by giving positive encouragement like, "Glad you realized that" to a student who self-corrected a math mistake. One student copied a problem wrong from the smart board and Mrs. Sperry smiled and asked her, "Is that what I have?" Mrs. Sperry asked in a guilt-free way to let the student know that it was okay to make mistakes. She felt that not drawing attention to mistakes builds confidence and can increase students' desires to do even better:

I think a successful student is going to have to feel like they can achieve, that they're going to be able to learn. They need to feel like they are good at something and realize that that strength is not going to be the same as their neighbor. Now I do think that a successful student is going to have to have some desire to be better or to do better.

In summary, these teachers expressed a desire to create a feeling of confidence that was critical for underachieving students in their classrooms. They put these desires into action by giving wait time for oral responses, offering sincere compliments, providing opportunities for success, and minimizing shame for mistakes.

#### ***4. High teacher expectations.***

Teachers' beliefs about what students can accomplish has great impact on how the class is taught and on the academic outcome of the students (Bongo, 2011; Martin, 2009; Bernard, 1998). All six of the teachers in the study commented on the importance of high teacher expectations. Mrs. Shay took a very personal approach to high expectations:

I'm all about some high expectations! I think, I mean, I hold myself accountable for high expectations everyday so I expect them (laughs) to hold themselves to high expectations. You know I tell them all the time, I can't work harder than you. You have to work harder than me because I have already been to fifth grade and so I just think they know you want them to be successful and you know you talk to them as a fifth grader. You go ahead and just kind of visualize for them sixth grade and what it's going to be. What is it going to take? You set goals with them. If they don't meet their goal, you have them say what happened. Why didn't you meet that goal? And let's go ahead and set another goal.

An example of Mrs. Shay wanting her students to work hard was seen while I was observing her. She challenged a student by saying, “Do you think you are up for it?” A few minutes earlier, she said to the whole class at the end of her mini-lesson, “I want to challenge you to hold yourself accountable.” When she was checking with book club groups about their reading goals, one group said that their goal was eleven pages and she reminded them it should be fifteen to twenty pages.

Mrs. Burnes believed that her students know that she is holding them accountable to her high expectations because she does not accept “mediocre” work. She pushed them to put forth more effort and retry or redo work that is not acceptable by showing them exemplary examples. I saw evidence of Mrs. Burnes’ high expectations when she told a student, “Remember, it’s never okay not to try.” A chart with the same words, “IT IS NEVER OKAY NOT TO TRY” was hanging on the classroom wall. She later encouraged another student, “Don’t ask for help until you’ve tried to figure it out.”

Mrs. Sperry strongly believed that all teachers, even those with special education inclusion classes like she has this year, should keep their requirements high and not accept poor quality work:

I think to challenge them, not to settle for just mediocre but to push and challenge them and have high expectations for them. It doesn’t matter that, you know this year I have Special Ed, and I haven’t had Special Ed in years and years and I thought about it a lot this summer and I thought I’m not going to change those expectations for them. You know when we talk about the testing and we talk about the standards, you know the

essential question, I'm going to still give that push, still say we're not looking for 800 we're looking for what we can do to exceed so I want my high expectations there.

Mrs. Sperry told how her expectations make her students perceive her as caring:

I'm not just satisfied with "just so." I encourage the students to know that their goal is not to just finish a task, but to finish it so that they can be proud of what they do. Quality versus quantity. I don't want them just to rush through something to be done but to have something they can be proud of. I really think that they might think that I'm a caring teacher because I push them to be reflective. You know, is this something you can be proud of? How could you have done it differently? Even if they do make mistakes, I encourage them to take that mistake and be a learning experience. I validate what they do.

All these teachers' responses about the importance of high expectations revealed specific actions and conversations with students. Students were pushed to work hard, expected to exceed and held accountable for quality student work. Exemplary student work examples were provided, individual goals were set and multiple opportunities were given for improvement. Also, teachers took the time to allow students to be reflective and helped them visualize their future academic paths.

### ***5. Active student engagement.***

One of the biggest commonalities of all six teachers in the study was active student engagement. Student engagement often involved students who were enjoying their learning and actively participating in their work. My observations showed "time on task" was a non-

negotiable in each classroom, and explicit instructions were given so that little or no time was wasted. Invariably, students being active meant that the teachers themselves were also active, guiding and moving about the room. The teachers gravitated between addressing the whole class for general guidance and individually conferencing. Each time the teachers conferenced with a student, they physically bent down to their level and quietly talked with them.

Mrs. Sperry, a fifth grade teacher, one of the participants with the most experience (31 years) acknowledged that active student involvement has drastically changed over the last few decades. She expressed how when she came out of college and how her first teaching years were pretty “old school.” Now, her students know the difference between productive and non-productive talk through expectations and procedures taught to them. Many times, Mrs. Sperry provided a morning message where students had to find a partner and have a thoughtful discussion about a task or homework. This is how she described her classroom:

I continuously search and try to come up with student activities that will give them opportunities to be actively involved. If it's not through hands-on, movement, if it's just getting up, you know, moving about the room, manipulatives, student group work, technology. You know I can remember you didn't talk in your desk. You sat in rows and you didn't talk. I think the children have an opportunity now to do so much talk but they know the difference between productive talk and not productive talk. Those expectations have been placed there. You know those procedures have been placed there even in the morning. There are many mornings that when they come in, their morning message guides them to what they're going to do. They're finding a partner and they're having thoughtful conversations about whatever that task is, checking or discussing homework,

trying to work through those discrepancies. I think we've come a long way from that old school.

While I was observing in Mrs. Sperry's room, the students were engaged in a math maintenance activity understanding division and multiplication with decimals. She wrote an equation on the smart board and students solved the same problem on their index cards. It seemed as if the students were familiar with this type of activity. She told them to use one side of the card to agree or disagree with the problem on the Smart Board and "Do anything you need, any of your thinking, prove it." Then Mrs. Sperry pointed to opposite sides of the room, agree or disagree sides, and the students had to move to one of the sides. Once they were on different sides of the room, Mrs. Sperry gave the students a creative way to change their minds, "If you think, aha!" swap sides in the next two minutes. Students had to partner up and share their results within their groups on each side of the room. Then the students returned to their seats and Mrs. Sperry led a whole group discussion but called on students to share their partners' thinking. Mrs. Sperry agreed with one student's comment and put excitement in her voice and said, "Aaaah!" A few minutes later, she put her palms up, stretched out her hands to get students to decide on choosing between multiplication or division with decimals using hand motions. "If decimals move left, smaller...if decimals move right, larger...we're going to have to think about decimal placement, how many places?" she said to emphasize this important strategy.

All six of the teachers provided multiple examples in their interviews of how much freedom their students have to become full and active students engaged in learning. One teacher, Mrs. Burnes, expressed the connection of students' interests to hands-on activities or project-based learning. She reported that avoiding paper/pencil activities showed how much she cared about how they want to learn:

This is what they enjoy this year and so by letting them do what they enjoy or the types of activities that they enjoy, it shows them that I care about how they feel and what they want as opposed to just giving them something that they would not enjoy doing.

In the short time of my observation in Mrs. Burnes' room, her students saw a PowerPoint, led discussions, sketched in response journals, and started on choice board projects. I also heard Mrs. Burnes give a signal for her students to listen up. She mimicked a McDonald's commercial tune and the students responded by saying, "I'm a lovin' it" which is another familiar McDonald's slogan.

Partner work seemed to be another commonality between all teachers. Perhaps this was due to their school county frameworks requiring daily instructional methods, which include Reading, Writing and Math workshops that use "turn and talk" time or class discussions. Mrs. Moreland emphasized togetherness by being very open with them:

You're doing this together, to help one another. You're doing it together because it's something that's a little bit harder and we need help from one another. We're here to support one another. I feel like that shows them that they're not in it alone. There's not only myself, but there's others that care about them learning and they are there to help each other.

Mrs. Shay, a fifth grade teacher, remarked that it was very rare to not have active students because of how her class time was structured around student talk:

There's a lot of student talk time. They all have a reading partner. They all have a writing partner because workshop you know is a lot of work and so you really can't do a workshop model in language arts without there being active student involvement. So

there is always an active engagement time. There's share time. They all have a partner if need be, elbow partner, turn and talk. They are in a group setting in their sitting area.

That kind of sets up that whole idea of active student involvement. They do the whole piggy back. They know what that means. When someone is speaking, they can piggyback on that idea without having to raise their hands. Manners, where they just know how to piggyback on someone's idea.

In Mrs. Shay's room while I was observing, she asked the book clubs to come up with their own reading goals within the next three minutes. She walked around the room, "One group talking, two groups talking, three groups talking." This time allowed all the students to move to a spot in the room and cooperatively work together on deciding reading goals with a book they had chosen for their club.

These teachers have found conversation and dialogue to be a powerful and much-needed tool for effective teaching and learning but they also employed hands-on activities, manipulatives, student group work, and technology to get their students engaged in learning. Teachers of younger students, like Mrs. Kendrick and Mrs. Freidman, have found that they cannot be teachers without active engagement involving physical movement. Both of these teachers admitted being very similar to the children they teach and found it very necessary to engage their students through a variety of activities. Mrs. Kendrick explained it this way:

I don't know if you can be a teacher without engagement and not allow the students to be active. It's just the way they learn. I'm a kid at heart, very active myself, so for me that is easy because it keeps them engaged. It keeps them involved. Then, like talk moves help them know that they're going to be held accountable for participating. I might even say,



I'm coming to you next. Or I might say I'm going to wait on you to speak and give them thinking time. You know, all of those teacher strategy moves work to encourage students to participate and it helps. I've seen it flourish more this year than other years because I was afraid to start it because I wanted control. As we lean more to engagement and letting go and letting students be in charge of their own learning I've seen it benefit the kids to really understand and know what they're talking about. I will always say, what is your learning goal? What was it you were supposed to learn today in the closure? But just prove to themselves and others they know and they're involved in their learning.

When I was observing a Social Studies lesson in Mrs. Kendrick's room, I saw the students leave the carpet when Mrs. Kendrick said, "One, two, break!" All the students clapped with her on "break!" as they returned to their seats. At the closing of the lesson, Mrs. Kendrick asked students to find their reading partner and share one thing that "they learned about Cesar Chavez." Pairs of students stood by each other, and Mrs. Kendrick called a few students to share what their partner had said to end the lesson.

### **B. Positive student relationship strategies.**

Strategies are planned actions and well-selected words that teachers use to help students become successful. Often when teachers see students struggling, they are motivated to plan actions designed to help with students' goals. The teachers expressed various strategies to build positive relationships such as (1) teacher humor, (2) personal sharing, (3) helping students during times of crisis, (4) finding the good in students, and (5) getting help for students.

### ***1. Teacher humor.***

It was quite evident in the teachers' observations that they considered humor and wit to be an effective way to aid students in becoming successful. Mrs. Freidman's comments often made her students giggle and smile when she playfully used sarcasm or acted out her emotions in a funny way. In her interview she shared about how her former students still try to sneak down to her room in the mornings to say hello, and when she yells at them to go back to their rooms, they share a laugh.

I saw Mrs. Freidman's humor in action while observing her manage about thirty-five (two classes were combined during this time) during Reader's Workshop. To start the lesson she turned her back towards the students and said, "I'm gonna have nice, quiet students, shhh, shhh ...I know you're going to be quiet. Let me see your smiling faces." She turned around smiling and said, "I've never seen such stinky smiling faces!" During the mini-lesson she dramatically talked with a pouty face about tackling hard words, "We don't cry! Do you cry?" A few minutes later she dismissed a small reading group and said, "See you later, alligator!" At the closure of workshop time, all the students were gathered again on the carpet and a student blurted out, "I'm a car rider!" Mrs. Freidman acknowledged the interruption by extending her hand and said, "Nice to meet you, car rider. I'm Mrs. Freidman!" During a word game like Hangman on the smart board, a student guessed the letter T and she said, "Like drink some tea?" If students guessed the correct letter, she teased them and told them that they really didn't want that letter.

Mrs. Shay acknowledged that she just couldn't be a "teacher" who totally separated herself from her students. She reported that students wanted a teacher to get to know them, have high expectations, and make learning fun by smiling, being happy and engaging. She stated that

being humorous and laughing lets them know you enjoy being with them every day. Being a fun teacher is another way to show you care according to Mrs. Shay.

Mrs. Burnes admitted she readily practiced humor:

I use a lot of humor in the classroom. While I'm doing a lot of talking, they don't have time to misbehave because they're listening for the next joke I'm gonna make. So I think humor and just forming those relationships is ...because if you don't have that relationship with the students then I don't think you can be effective.

I saw two instances of Mrs. Burnes using humor when I was in her class during my observation. She had just complimented a student's work but the student must have covered it so Mrs. Burnes made a sad face and said, "You're not going to let me see it?" Another time, Mrs. Burnes was walking around making sure everyone was busy and she saw a student not working while sitting near computers. She asked, "You finished?" and laughed, letting the student know he should be working, and he moved back to his desk.

## ***2. Personal sharing.***

As discussed earlier, teachers inevitably brought their own lives into the classroom because of their backgrounds and experiences. Four of the teachers shared times when they felt it was appropriate to disclose a personal life event or feeling to encourage students. Mrs. Shay cited many difficulties that her students faced and how she tried to help them by being open about her own struggles. She talked with them about her struggles in the fifth grade by letting them know that she remembers when the same things happened to her to make them feel connected and supported.

During my observation in Mrs. Shay's class, I witnessed her connect the teaching point to a personal life experience. She was talking about fluency and being an authentic reader. She told the students a personal story about listening to a speaker recently. She said, "He talked so slow that I forgot what he was saying," and she purposely read a paragraph with a slow, choppy voice. Then she modeled fluency by reading it again but using a smooth, natural voice. Like Mrs. Shay, who shared about her own struggles in elementary school, Mrs. Moreland made it clear to her students that she had also been through trials in the past too:

At the beginning of the year, one of the first steps is letting them get to know me. And to let them know my areas of interest but strengths and weaknesses. And to let them see that I as a teacher, have weaknesses. I tell them about like my past as a student and things that I struggled with as a student so that they can see that I am by no means any sort of perfectionist. And that I have flaws that they see daily. That kind of helps them to get that sense of security, to let them see that it's okay to make mistakes and its okay to not know sometimes.

### ***3. Helping students during times of crisis.***

Helping students during times of crisis can be crucial for teachers to deal with during an instructional day. Mrs. Sperry reported doing all she could and putting a plan in place when needed:

I listen and if I can't share a similar life event that would help them go through that difficult time, I find someone who can. Our counselor, Maria, or Lucy has had teenage daughters more recent than I have, particularly this year since we're team teaching... but I know I can remember last year a student that I had, that because of the loss of his mother

and it wasn't through death, it was by mother's choice, he was very angry. At one point we just had to tell him, it's not fair that things have happened to you like this. But you're almost middle school and at some point you have to make choices. So now, I guess kinda pushing them to realize they're getting close to being accountable. They can either make the choice to stay in that anger or move out of it, I don't know... that's tough, I think it's just by being there to listen and if I can't be the sounding board they need, then finding somebody that can, finding resources for them... I do let them know that I love them and I do use that word. This probably pushes it some... but sometimes I ask them if they go to church and if they pray and I let them know that I will be thinking about them.

During all of my observations, I only saw one incident when a student was having a difficult time responding to the teacher and not participating. In Mrs. Burnes class, all the students began working on their projects except for one girl, and Mrs. Burnes noticed she was unhappy. Mrs. Burnes quietly spoke to her, "I understand you're upset because you can't get started on your PowerPoint. You have two choices (from student choice board assignment). How can you get started on your second choice? If you pout, you won't get started on either one of them." Mrs. Burnes then helped other students around the room. A few minutes later she comes back to the girl and sits beside the girl and asks, "So, you're still mad?" The student replied, "This whole year I've only done one PowerPoint." Mrs. Burnes told her, "Go to the bathroom. Make a decision to come back and get started and all the anger is gone." Mrs. Burnes followed her out into the hall and watched as the student went down the hall to the restroom. Mrs. Burnes went back to helping others and later the girl returned and began working on a drawing. Mrs. Burnes checked on her and quietly said to her, "That is beautiful, neat. Thank you for getting started. What's going on with you? Let's be serious. (Points to the word "serious" on the choice

board instructions.) Look at me. Go deeper. After you finish the picture, tell me what their function is.”

#### ***4. Finding the good in students.***

Seeing and hearing positive comments and behaviors was one of the most noticeable observations I made in all the classrooms. Even though each classroom had students not following directions, not listening or even on task, the teachers still found ways to be sincere and encouraging.

Mrs. Shay realized that to build relationships with her underachieving students she must steer away from any negativity and concentrate on what her students are doing well:

I try anytime I can to find them doing something good. I find their strengths instead of pointing out their weaknesses. (Laughs) They already know. They're well aware of their weaknesses you know.

During my time observing in Mrs. Shay's room, she made sure that she recognized strengths and showed her approval by saying things like: “See how that helped you? That's awesome!” “I love how you...” and “You've got to be proud. You're sounding so much better.” For those students who were difficult to reach, Mrs. Shay employed various constructive tactics to increase student participation and recognition of progress:

I think you definitely do that subtle like... If you put a book on their desk that you know they would like with a note on it and you don't necessarily say something, they appreciate that. Or if you have a child, “left hand, right hand,”... you tell them, if they raise their right hand you will never call on them. But if they raise their left hand or see them with their left hand up, you'll know they know the answer. You know those ones

that are hard to reach... just things like that to let them know, feel good about themselves, brag on them whenever you can.

Another fifth grade teacher I observed, Mrs. Burnes, showed her appreciation and agreement with student, when they were helping clean up or helping each other, by using phrases like “thank you,” “I love that,” and “thank you for a good work time.” To emphasize following instructions she told a student, “I like the way you have your notebook out and so does...” I also observed Mrs. Sperry using these same technique when speaking to the entire class but calling out particular names and identifying their actions about labeling parts, using strategies and writing equivalent fractions. She also said, “I love it, I love it!” after looking at one student’s work.

Mrs. Moreland stated that before she looked for strengths in her strugglers, she lets her students discover for themselves how they have improved:

I guess when it comes to them struggling I have to kind of take it down to the level of where they are...look at where they are no matter what it is they're trying to accomplish. But truly look at where are they in their areas of difficulties. Then I want to make them see. I want them to think... and to know that what they are already doing, they're doing a good job to let them realize what they've already been able to accomplish... and then with those, I try to give strategies and very concrete ways to build on that. You take it down to their level where they are, let them see what they have accomplished-good positive things. You pick some strategies and concrete ways to build. Then after giving them a strategy, just giving them time to practice. Because I can't expect and I don't want

them to expect the first after working through the strategy that they're going to be successful right away.

Mrs. Moreland told a student, "You're doing a good job, stay focused," while I was observing her. She was in a small group and was monitoring the other students at their desks. She saw another student not working independently and said, "Keep going" to encourage him to write. Sensing another student was getting frustrated, she told him, "You're doing fine."

Mrs. Freidman thought that caring teachers should show how much they cared for their students by constantly encouraging them in their daily routines so mistakes or new procedures will not discourage them:

I think they should have procedures in place so that the students know what to do so that it's not a punishment. At the beginning, it's more like, okay, remember what we have to do. It's a procedure and we sing. You want them to know what they have to do and how they have to do it. So and I'll say to them, "If you can show me this. Oh my gosh! Then we can come over and sing a second song or we can come over and do this!" I want them to do what they need and they know what they need. I want them to do it because it will bring them over faster. Because I want to be with them and do something extra. I think if you do it in a positive way, instead of saying, "Oh gosh, you're always so....the last one...Oh my gosh!" You're the one to eyeball and say, "I wonder if you can get there like maybe third or fourth? Oh my goodness!" You just played it. You're a role player, an actor. You're an actress. That's what you have to show that you want them to do well.



### *5. Getting help for students.*

Even though the teachers in the present study have been identified as being highly effective among their coworkers, help for students can also come from someone other than themselves. All the teachers in the study took a proactive approach to find out as much as they could about their students at the beginning of the year. At other times, it was necessary to reach out for help when problems surfaced. At the beginning of the year, Mrs. Moreland reported trying to connect with her students and feeling that it is her responsibility to find out all she can from others about her students:

I try to talk with maybe their friends or people who have been in their classes before or talk with them on the playground. Because I think that there are some that are going to be kind of clammed up and they're not going to want to make the connection. It's my job to seek outside sources so that when I do talk with them, then I have something to base our conversation on. Or if I am giving them something, say a book, and I'm trying to get them to read, then I have a book of their interest to try to entice them.

Four of the teachers felt that when they exhausted all their ideas on helping students deal with difficulties, then it was time to seek help from others to address the situation. Mrs. Burnes considered herself to be caring concerning achievement because she never gives up on students, even if it means asking others for help.

Even if they don't do well, I work with them and find other ways to present the same material in a different way because I don't just give up. If they don't do well on an assessment or they don't seem to get it, I go in and continue working or stay after school. I'll pull small groups or one-on-one conferences. If I can't get through to the student, then

I look for ways outside of me for help. So, if I can't do it, if there's a student still having a problem, I'll ask a para or another co-worker or administrator for strategies that they may have had to help. You have to find a way to reach them. So, if what you're doing is not reaching them, then you have to kinda self-reflect and find a way that you can get to them. So I guess I would say that I just kinda...trial and error, find the way. If it takes a lot of different attempts, eventually, if you don't give up on trying, you're going to reach them.

Mrs. Shay told about difficult situations in fifth grade:

Well, in 5th grade you have a lot of difficulties that come about. You have deaths, puberty, lots of divorce coming this age... Writers Workshop is a great way to deal with difficulties. So you're not just focusing on that particular child. You might be bringing out a theme or something that might help them. I think book therapy where you might can find books that might deal with that kind of issue, making sure they get connected with a counselor if needed. You know just valuing their difficulties. A lot of our kids face many difficulties.

## **Summary**

The teachers in this study reported a very broad view of effective teaching by supporting their underachieving students through student-centered teaching practices and positive student relationship strategies. Throughout the teacher interviews and observations, teachers were very resourceful in providing student-centered instructional techniques focused on student growth and understanding. Creating positive classroom communities where students were actively involved in engaging lessons was important to the teachers and seen in classroom observations. Teachers

held high expectations for student achievement and appropriate behavior and built students' confidences when needed.

Specific positive student relationship strategies such as sharing personal stories, using humor, and finding the good in students were often used to help students achieve personal and academic goals. Teachers provided personal support for students in crisis situations but also sought help from others when necessary. In the next section, I address how teachers' efficacy beliefs contributed to the actual practices and strategies they used in their classrooms with students.

## **II. Teacher Efficacy Beliefs**

The second theme identified in the present study was teachers' efficacy beliefs about their abilities to teach and their students' abilities to learn. According to Collier (2005), teachers who believe in students' capacities to learn (efficacy) even when they do not believe in themselves can make a critical difference, especially for underachievers. Collier further stated that high efficacy beliefs appear to be an expression of teachers' caring for students' success. Research documents that teachers who care about students and their achievement exert a powerful influence on academic achievement in schools with high rates of student success, including those with diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Buese, 2005; Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Cha, 2008; Martin, 2009; Thompson, 2010). However, there are many unknowns and questions of how and why some struggling students become successful each year in particular classrooms. Because teachers' efficacy beliefs about their expertise and their students' capacity to learn have been shown to have an influence on student outcomes, it is

important to understand how such beliefs actually contribute to teachers' abilities and willingness to help students succeed.

This section is devoted to discussing the efficacy of the six study participants. The aim of this section is to provide a foundation for illustrating how teachers' beliefs are applied to their practices and interactions with students. Through the nomination surveys, it became clear that it was vital to examine what drives teachers' everyday practices and relationships while focusing on student achievement.

The teachers in the present study seemed to have foundational beliefs that served as a basis for the effective student-centered practices and positive student relationship strategies they applied and characteristics they exemplified. Furthermore, their positive views of children and learning seemed to guide them to build caring relationships that encouraged student achievement.

Four sub-themes emerged during the analysis of teacher interviews that added meaning and depth to the major theme of teacher efficacy beliefs. They included: a) all students can learn, (b) success for all students, (c) humanistic values about teaching and students, and (d) mixed feelings about how reform efforts impact their teaching and learning beliefs. In this section, I describe each belief and conclude the sections with a discussion on teachers' beliefs as a whole.

#### **A. All students can learn.**

In research literature, the idea of successful students is frequently debated when examining effective teachers (Wenglinsky, 2000; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Often the definition of success is clarified to identify which students can be classified as successful or showing academic progress. Therefore, the question of who is actually showing progress or learning must

be explored. Participants in this study generally described successful academic learners as any student showing forward movement from one point to another without regard to where the student started or ended. This broad definition of student learning led the teachers to describe progress, or student learning, as “picking up a child from where they are and moving them along” or “going from point A to point B.” Mrs. Shay stated that the number one thing that makes her an effective teacher is “the belief that all students can achieve—even underachieving ones.” Another teacher, Mrs. Moreland, explained it this way:

Yes, I definitely think all students can learn. They’re not going to learn at the same pace but all students can learn. Being willing to accept that they may not all be successful on grade level standards or meet that end of the year (CRCT) goal but have their individual needs at hand and think about the progress that they’re making along the way.

Mrs. Burnes was in same camp with the other two teachers and stated, “Absolutely all can learn! Maybe not in the same way but they can all learn. You just have to find that avenue to their different teaching methods, different teaching styles.”

Another fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Sperry, reiterated this same notion of all students learning:

Yes (all students can learn) but they're not going to learn at the same time as everyone else is going to learn. But they can all learn. They can all go from point A to point B but it's not going to be at the same time as everybody else but they can learn. The success for some students will not be the same for others... to get to 800 on a CRCT, to make a C... to at the beginning of the year to write a paragraph...or at the end of the year to write a paragraph... complete sentences... but all students can learn.

Mrs. Freidman has previously taught special education inclusion classes and wholeheartedly agreed that all students could learn but each child has a different learning goal and each had a different way to show what they know. Sometimes she finds it necessary to take the time to actually show children their progress:

I think if a child makes progress, there are successful. If a child is not making progress, then you try something else so they can be successful students. Well, because you have to look at it, you can't say oh my goodness my kids are all reading on A's and "Waah, waah!" But you're not looking at the first time I read this passage with this child, he didn't know any of the words. Now three months, later he can read it but he got some of the words wrong. He still may not have passed it but hold them side by side. Did that child make progress? Yes of course! If they don't make enough progress that's when you have to work and try something else. That's when the interventions come in. I sometimes pull that out their HCLI (Houston County Literacy Inventory) folder, their math, the spelling that we do, and I say look at three months ago. Look at that! What does that mean? You didn't know any of those words! Oh no! Look at here, look at all those checks (running record tally marks)! Oh my gosh! It's wonderful!

Mrs. Kendrick defined success in school as any amount of progress, which then makes a student successful:

All students can learn. You've got to pick up that child from where they are and find a way to move them along the best way you can. Any progress is progress. Progress is progress. So that means despite the lack of time that I had to give during teaching. I've got to find a way to get a child from where they are to where they need to be.

As each teacher discussed why all students can learn, they provided details explaining that their views may not be seen as the common political view of how or when it is determined that a student is learning. The students who the teachers identified as being actual learners in their classrooms did not have a connection to a state curriculum assessment or a numerical figure on a standardized test. Teachers identified students as actually learning even though they might not be meeting particular benchmarks or making certain grades on a report card. Therefore, none of the teachers gauged student learning by typical school measures such as the CRCT or the state writing test. Learning and progress were seen as different and unique for each child and not connected to an outside source that dictates the guidelines for deciding how and when students are learning or being successful in schools.

## **B. Success for all students.**

Success for all had two meanings in the present study. First, teachers discussed how students experience success in school. Then the participants told about how students can be successful in life. Therefore, this section about success was sub-divided into school success and life success.

### ***1. School success.***

According to the teacher participants, school success was related to the idea that all students can learn. All the teachers reported that all students can learn, and all of them spoke of finding ways to make each student experience success. Individual attention to each child's learning progression was preceded by the teachers' desires to "find a way to get children from where they are to where they need to be" or "find a way to reach that child—you're not going to give up on them." Even if a student had little school success in the past, several teachers stated,

“You just got to take the child for who they are.” This thinking of students with individualized goals instead of meeting a specific mark on a uniform assessment, led teachers to focus on the unconventional needs of each one rather than grouping them with others who may not need as much attention.

A successful student was largely defined as a student who put forth effort with a desire to do better. In other words, a successful student was a student who had shown individual learning growth or progress. Terms like brave, risk-taker, organized, motivated, and confident, as well as personal actions such as holding themselves accountable and feeling like they can achieve, learn or be good at something were used by the teachers to describe successful students. Mrs. Kendrick recognized students who were successful at school as those who were making daily efforts:

A successful student is a student who is confident in their abilities, who has a clear understanding of who they are as a student, and then puts forth the effort to try. If you have that kind of make-up in a child or can get that child to start doing that every day, then you can get them to try to learn something, move along, and whatever.

Having courage to manage their daily lives is how Mrs. Shay described a successful student.

I think a successful student is a brave student. I think about how brave our kids are at Appleton Elementary. They are brave in the sense that a lot of them wake up every day and face things that none of us have faced. Yet they come. So successful, I think is, brave. A risk-taker is someone who holds themselves accountable, who tries even if



they're not sure, who just really pushes themselves beyond, who believes in themselves, and who grows as a learner as the year goes on.

In turn, Mrs. Shay, explained how important it was for teachers to reciprocate their students' bravery for student success:

Being brave with them. I think they have to see you as being a learner as well. I don't think you can just stand up there and be a teacher. I think you have to be a learner as well and you have to make mistakes. They have to see that you're learning right along with them.

Mrs. Moreland identified a successful student this way:

I think a successful student is one who builds study skills. They're building skills as a student when they are participating in class. They are learning how to meet different standards. They are learning different skills and habits as a student. You know it may not be that they are that all "A" person but if they instill the values and habits students need later in life as adults, they are being successful.

Teachers felt that they could support student learning through a variety of ways. Teachers concentrated on finding methods that consistently promoted student interests, strengths, and learning styles. These approaches resulted in providing practical help with appropriate reading level texts, test accommodations, small group instruction, "arranging" partner work, and a gradual release toward independence. All of these tactics led teachers to deem students as being successful mainly because the students responded positively to the way learning was presented to them. None of the teachers gave a uniform target that must be met or a standardized score for students to be classified as a successful in school.

The processes of believing in yourself, holding yourself accountable, pushing yourself, feeling like you can achieve, and taking on new learning, were all expressed by teachers as indicators of successful students. Constant encouragement and guidance were provided by the teachers simultaneously with curriculum instruction. It was obvious that they used their experience and expertise to respond to the feelings of their learners to accomplish academic goals. This is evident due to the fact that all the teachers included strong signs of emotional growth to define a student who was successful in school. It seemed that the teachers felt that growing as a learner would be impossible without students first making decisions about their personal motivation before learning content knowledge.

## ***2. Life success.***

All teachers felt that success in life can be viewed in a similar fashion as student success. In other words, as noted earlier, the teachers in the present study felt that success in schools should be measured individually and not necessarily connected to a required academic goal set by someone who is not teaching the students. Therefore, success in life as described by the teachers, was typically an individual goal commonly tied to a person's interests or strengths. It was not defined as meeting a certain level of education, career status or income. It was defined by some of the teachers as, "being happy," "a productive citizen" or "finding something you love and doing well at it" even if it was a "janitor" or a "handyman." One teacher, Mrs. Freidman, made the point to say that some students think success means money and in her opinion, success is not money. She defined a person as successful if they feel their life has purpose and they are always learning:

Success means, do you feel your life has purpose and are you always learning? Are you going to continue learning something new? I think if they understand they can be successful whether they work at McDonald's or whether they're high up the corporate ladder, successful is what you feel. I still have some girls who still say they want to stay at home and have babies. Wonderful! Wonderful! You know you don't hear that anymore, you really don't. I also heard I want to work at a cocktail lounge like my mama and drew a picture of the bar. I'm thinking, OK! Hey, waitressing! ...letting them know whatever their dreams are, if they work hard they can at least take a stab at it. But be happy with the trying. Be happy with how you are putting together the plan to make your life work. So that you don't have to say, when I graduate I'm going to have a million dollars. Well, how are you going to do that? If you're going to steal it, that's against the law, sorry! First grade is such a joyful grade for a lot of them because they see themselves as doing whatever they want. They see it, I want to be a basketball player, a baseball player...and right now they can do that. They can do that by playing sports.

Each teacher participant felt like caring teachers in schools can actually contribute to students' success later in life. Certain skills or behaviors like motivation and organization were considered to be important enough to implement along with the mandated curriculum standards for future success in life. Teachers used their own self-prescribed methods to “look at the whole child” to find personal interests, “tapping in to what makes them tick” or setting realistic goals for students that would help them later in life. Encouraging students to work to their best abilities—with constant practice, diligence, persistence, and goal setting—were believed to be lifelong skills that would increase success later in life. Mrs. Burnes saw it this way:

A teacher's job is not to just teach content. A teacher's job is to mentor students daily. So a caring teacher is there and they can contribute to lifelong success just by helping them... like finding their interests. If they're interested in engineering, find resources for them in engineering. If they're interested in art, give them opportunities in the classroom to foster that gift they have. So I think you can shape kids. You can find what they're interested in and help them in that way so that they can take those things with them, even in elementary school. It starts this early.

If needed, Mrs. Kendrick uses her own story to show students how students can overcome obstacles they might face in life:

I come from being raised with ten grandchildren by a grandmother who sent us all to Catholic school who had a blind husband. My mother passed away and my father was off in college. But I'm successful because of my upbringing, the efforts and hard work I put forth, by people in my balcony, in my community encouraging me. Despite the resources not being there, those were the things I needed to be successful. So, in turn, as a caring teacher, I don't let them think anything other than that. If I have to share my story to help a child relate and to see that there's a world outside their street, then I do.

Even though none of teachers declared content knowledge to have less importance than building life-long skills, the curriculum standards were used to highlight life lessons through historical people or events. Effective teachers tried to make classroom curriculum relevant to real world situations to provide true examples of how others have persevered and become successful in life. For example, one teacher showed how a Social Studies theme of conflict causes change, can be expanded outside the classroom.

Students can learn that they have choices that lead to consequences. You know, it's not all about Science, Social Studies and Math but it's about outside, what you're going to do. I do try to make that connection and what we do in the classroom as something more than just academics but a real life story.

Another teacher used famous Americans as a way to let students know "hey—that's sorta like me and they're a famous American then I'll do that." Even though several teachers defined life success as "not just college," one teacher encouraged her students by using positive statements telling them they were going to college. Therefore, college was shown as a possibility for those who were struggling academically, but not necessarily as the only route to success in life.

Engaging students' minds about personal satisfaction, interests and realistic goals, proved to be instrumental in preparing for success in life according to most of these teachers. As one teacher shared, "they may go home and never hear a positive statement, never watch it on TV or see anything positive, so you just have to encourage them." Several teachers mentioned how past generations can negatively affect today's students but they continued to reassure them that they can be successful.

They're already caught in a cycle that their parents have been in, that their grandparents have been in. But I believe if they can break out of that and they have someone there encouraging them, supporting them, letting them know that they are caring about them, they can be successful.

### **C. Humanistic teacher values.**

The teachers in the present study believed that teaching includes extending their influence well beyond their expertise in content areas. Certain principles seemed to be of such high value to the teachers that they carry over from their personal lives into their professions as educators. In particular, two guiding aspects emerged when participants were asked about their values and views on education. First, teachers spoke of how education can empower students inside and outside of the classroom. Secondly, teachers stressed the importance of developing the whole child instead of focusing on one area. Each of these values were briefly illustrated.

#### ***1. Education can empower.***

Teachers in the present study expressed the importance of how education or learning in school, can enable students to accomplish things much greater than what they are being asked to achieve in their classrooms. Three teachers specifically discussed the significance and seriousness of students applying their learning to a wider context. Mrs. Sperry found that her own upbringing causes her to share the value of education with her students:

You know what? I can remember that the value of education was always discussed in my home. It wasn't really because my mom went to maybe a two year school for a secretarial degree... my dad-a mechanic. It wasn't, what job are you going to get when you get out of high school? But, what college are you going to go to? The value of education was always talked about. We didn't get paid for our grades. You brought home good grades because that is what you were supposed to do and when you walked in the door you were proud to show that. I think that I try to express to the kids that same thing...what that

education is going to do for them, the value of that and that you do it because that's the right thing to do.

Mrs. Moreland and Mrs. Burnes also found themselves speaking to students about the importance of an education and how they should see school as helping with their future accomplishments. Mrs. Burnes tried to step in when she felt like she may be the only way to emphasize education:

I've noticed in my teaching a lot of times students don't come to me motivated. They feel like maybe they don't have a support system at home that values education and so I try to work to instill in them as best I can that it is important to be serious about your school work, to work hard, and achieve success ...Just letting them see the importance of education and how it's important not just in that moment, how they need to become a lifelong learner, and how they will use the practices, skills, and the content of their learning, not just in that classroom but down the road.

## ***2. Responsibility to the whole child.***

Noddings' (1988) concept of moral education emphasizes that teachers need to be not only concerned with what their students know but with the type of individuals they will become. Noddings maintains that teachers model caring when they are concerned with students' academic achievement and interested in the development of students as moral individuals. Even though most teachers seemed to endorse the value of an education in the traditional sense, Mrs. Kendrick explained how teachers needed to expand their role beyond the delivery of content knowledge:

They need lots of attention: personally, physically, mentally, and academically. I mean just as a whole child. They need that attention and they need it specific to their own needs ... not just procedural but needs for them as a student, as a person. I keep going back to what their worth is, what their value is and they won't ever know that if nobody ever sees that in them. So that's why they need so much attention.

Mrs. Shay expressed that if you get to know students "on a personal level" beyond the school setting, you will value them despite their academic achievements:

Being caring is to look at that person as a whole. Being successful doesn't mean that everyone goes to college or that everyone does these particular things. Successful is finding something you love, doing it, and doing it well.

Later she added that this means that you must "get to know them on a personal level outside of school." Mrs. Freidman alluded to the fact that focusing on academic skills, especially for annual test preparation, can keep teachers from seeing the bigger picture. She stated, "One of our things, is to work on the whole student. So if you're just working on I before e except after c or where a period goes, you're not looking at the whole student."

#### **D. Mixed feelings about educational reform.**

Most of the teachers spoke of mixed emotions when trying to decide how reform efforts like NCLB and RT3 and state standards relate to positive relationships with students. Trying to balance standards, reform, and relationships was seen as a difficult task by several teachers.



Mrs. Moreland stated that the demands of reform “can get in the way of teachable moments” and lessen the chances of teaching other skills that could assist her students to meet their needs at particular times.

As a teacher, we've got to break outside of looking at our end of year expectations, standards, what expectations are set up for us through government, and we've got to pay attention to the fact that this is a child. And the needs that child needs and not just their academic needs.

One teacher, Mrs. Freidman, strongly opposed all the negative issues that she has experienced with these types of initiatives and their requirements. She freely expressed her opinion:

I came from preschool. How can you tell the child, who couldn't read a lick and is now reading but may not have passed it. All that success that they did was so good and you're progressing and then they fail the CRCT. Explain that. Explain that to that child! It's almost like whatever we say doesn't matter because they didn't pass and it's in black and white right there. And if they didn't pass, that reflects the teacher, the principal... that reflects the whole school. I don't think that's right. It's very hard to develop those positive relationships when you are looking at what they're doing instead of what it is about them that you may have to fix...It really damages I think, relationships. They're some teachers that can do it. But when it came, my stomach hurt. I think it does not help. I think we can do it, yes, but instead of creating and building those positive relationships...you're working on the actual work that a student has to master and not the whole child. You're just looking at that one test that they have to take that will determine

where they might be the next year and what the teacher thinks about them the next year just because of that one score.

The majority of teachers felt like standards and reform efforts hindered more than they helped. Standards were seen as a disservice for underachievers according to Mrs. Sperry:

I'm really not sure that those initiatives foster positive relationships as much as the government would think so. Just because the standards are pushing students to achieve sometimes so much faster than they're developmentally ready. Teachers who are really caught in there and getting those students from here to meet the standard. It's just like pushing the information to them and not taking the time to build the relationships that might be more effective in that student achievement because you've got to get from point A to point B so quickly. The standards were written for every child as if they were exactly the same at that same level and they're not. I think we're doing a disservice to our children when we're just feeding information to them and wanting them to give it right back to us. I sometimes think that the RT3 and NCLB does that because it doesn't allow you to stop and know your children as much as it information gathering. I think they hinder more than help because we have an end date for getting that standard completed, that assessment date and we've got some students who are not achieving or they're not allowed to master those skills. I don't know but I don't think they foster positive relationships.

Another teacher, Mrs. Burnes, felt that NCLB may have been useful in helping underachieving students by putting a focus on them but it allowed average students to become

mediocre and did not push them to a higher success. But she still has her doubts about initiatives helping with positive teacher-student relationships:

I'm not sure that a lot of those initiatives create positive relationships to be honest because you're working toward a score. You're working toward a number instead of seeing it as a relationship with a student. You're looking for data instead of building relationships with the student. I would say they are not a help to fostering caring relationships.

Teachers often felt that they must choose between working towards the standards to help students meet state score levels or doing what may be best for the students. For example, Mrs. Burnes often felt like it was necessary to stop instructional time to talk about bigger life lessons even though she has a certain amount of content to cover:

I have a lot of real conversations with my students. We sit down and it may be math time but we may be talking about life every now and then because I see that it's a class thing where they just feel like they can't ...that this is just it for them...so we talk about that. So I think that understanding where they come from, even though I can't relate, I can understand it. I can research it and I can understand it. Then I can reach them better and be more effective.

The teachers' responses to reform such as NCLB and RT3 pointed out that these initiatives emphasized fixed measurements for students to achieve each year. In reality, progress for each student cannot be shown on one test because they did not all start on a level playing field. These reform efforts also require progress to be shown on standards taught during the year for all students in each grade yet many underachievers begin the year below grade level from their

peers. The requirements of the curriculum standards to be tested do not allow teachers the freedom of spending extra time on other skills and issues or developing relationships with students.

### **Summary**

By examining teachers' perceptions about learning, students' successes, the importance of an education, responsibilities of teachers to students, and educational reform, this section identified the common teacher efficacy beliefs of the participants that were influential in the academic and personal goals of students. Teachers in the present study believed that all students can learn and achieve success in life. Their beliefs and values led them to feel responsible and qualified to make sure that their students learn. More specifically, the values described by the teachers drove them to believe in their effectiveness while continually searching for ways to meet the needs of the students. Education was valued as a source of empowerment for success in school and later in life and the teachers strived to make this point with their students.

Embedded deep within the teachers' beliefs and values that directed their teaching was a strong emphasis on relating to each child as a whole and unique individual within their classrooms. Teachers' statements revealed that they do not base student success on grades or test scores. Instead, they stressed that students' hard work and progress combined with teachers' efforts produced a level of success. Consequently, teachers spoke of mixed feelings about reform legislation like NCLB and RT3 because of conflicting views about how and when children achieve success.

### **III. Students as Unique Individuals within Social Contexts**

In the third theme, teachers viewed students as unique individuals within various social contexts. Students learn within their social contexts of their classroom, their ethnic culture, and their socioeconomic status but they are still unique individuals with their own needs. It deals with the teachers' interests in the well-being of individual students in the class. Although teachers instruct entire classes, a lot of their concerns center around certain children and a majority of their time is spent on how to encourage and support individual growth and development. Two aspects emerged during the analysis of the theme of students as unique individuals within social contexts: individual instruction and individual and social influences on the teachers and the students.

#### **A. Individual instruction.**

Individual or differentiated instruction has been well documented as a way to customize instruction to better fit the academic needs of one child. All six of the teacher participants affirmed these findings that they are more effective as a teacher when instruction is tailored to improve students' achievement due to various reasons that are unique for each student. Teachers have found that students come into their classrooms from all walks of life with many different backgrounds, cultures, experiences, or socioeconomic situations. All of these circumstances influence students' ability to learn and progress in school. Even though there is a state mandated curriculum, teachers found it necessary to approach some students differently to reach them.

Mrs. Shay recognized that all students do learn differently and a "one size fits all" approach never works. She stated that it certainly seems like you care more and it makes you more effective when you are tuned in to different learning styles. She expanded on this theme of individual instruction:

Well, I think you're always more effective when you differentiate in some way because you meet kids where they are. I think kids learn best or anybody learns best when you meet them where they are. You know, where are you? I tell my kids all the time, it doesn't matter to me where you are. We're going to take you where you are and move you that step forward. So when you differentiate, you find out where they are and you find ways to customize instruction, whether it be different reading material, different reading level, whether it will be a seating arrangement, or small group versus whole group. Maybe you have to bring in some pictures instead of just words. What is it that you have to do to meet that goal?

During my observation, I observed Mrs. Shay customize instruction during a Reader's Workshop focusing on being an "authentic reader." After her mini-lesson, students dismissed to meet with their book clubs for three minutes to set their next reading goal. Next, most of the students returned to their desks and five of them went to the back table. Even though they were sitting as a group, they each had different books and Mrs. Shay circulated among them individually. She quietly spoke with each one, suggesting, complimenting, and drawing attention to self-awareness of their improvement. Some of her comments were: "Good job," "That's awesome," "See how that helped you?" and "What I might do..."

Another fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Burnes, had similar feelings to Mrs. Shay because she said "without question you are more effective when you differentiate because no two students are alike. So you can't expect a one size fits all in your classroom." Mrs. Burnes has found an effective way to customize individual instruction by allowing the students to make decisions about their learning. Often, students are allowed to work on a choice board offering different ways to show the same thing. Mrs. Burnes explains:

I do a whole lot of choice boards like you saw when you observed. In those choices I generally will have a couple of choices that will cater to the audio learner. Then I'll have a couple that will foster creativity. So I do a lot of the choice boards to differentiate by learning styles and ability.

I was able to observe Mrs. Burnes' students using the choice boards when she told them about their next science project and passed out the sheets containing the choice board. The board contained six choices and two were required but three would give you extra credit according to Mrs. Burnes. She allowed the students just a couple of minutes to decide which ones they would begin to start on that day. All the choices were a different way to learn about the same content- human cells and their functions. Choices including making a PowerPoint, creating a test with answer choices and drawing a poster. All of them seemed very excited about starting a new project this way except for one student who was unhappy that she could not be one of the first ones to use one a classroom computer.

Just prior to Mrs. Burnes' Science lesson, when I first entered her room, she had just finished showing a few slides from a PowerPoint about how WWI began. She then asked the students to "continue their learning" in their readers' response journals with a sketch or drawing with labels. The students were sitting in table groups of six and quickly went to their seats and started their drawings. One student asked if the drawing could be "like a comic?" She said, "Absolutely, very creative idea!" Mrs. Burnes walked around, bending down to individual students helping and commenting on their work. Both of the activities, choice boards and sketching in the journals, allowed students to show their learning according to their own abilities and styles.

Mrs. Sperry started teaching in the 1970's and she realizes that individual instruction has not always been around and she sees its benefits in today's classroom:

I can go back and think about earlier when I had first started teaching. You had the spelling book, you had the English and the math book. You really were responsible for going through the first part, QCCs (Quality Core Curriculum). We didn't have any standards then you know that drove our instruction. Our instruction was that textbook. I think I'm more an effective teacher now because I realize that teaching is not cookie cutter. You know what's going to work for Johnny, is not going to work for Susie and so to find those learning styles, the strategies, you have to differentiate to find success.

These teachers reported that individual instruction is still somewhat new to experienced educators who used the same textbooks in the past to meet the instructional needs for all students in their classrooms. Whole class instruction did not seem to meet the wide ranges of levels in each classroom however personal, customized instruction was more effective, motivating and increased chances of success.

### **B. Individual and social influences.**

Teachers are believed to have the capacity to impact the character, development, and behavior of students. Likewise, teachers and students have influences on their lives that happen outside of school or long before they have come together with students in a school environment. The teachers in the present study spoke of influences in their teaching. They include: (1) their own personal influences, (2) cultures of students and teachers, (3) diverse backgrounds of students and teachers, and (4) socioeconomic influences.



### *1. Individual influences on the teachers.*

Like the students in their classrooms, every teacher in the study had a different background that makes them who they are. The teachers spoke of their own parental influences, race, and compassion and how this has affected their teaching.

Mrs. Burnes readily admitted that being Caucasian surprises many of her African American students until they realize that her own background doesn't create a barrier:

I clearly am Caucasian and all of my students, actually, I have more White students this year than I've ever had and there's two. So I think that they come into my classroom first day of school, and they look at me and they're like "Oh wow!" They don't really know what to expect. But then to show them that there is no barrier there, that no matter what cultural background they are, no matter what race they are, that I care about them and they see that quickly. So there's never been an issue of my race versus their race or my culture versus their cultural background because they know that it doesn't matter to me. They're my student no matter what and I want them to succeed no matter what.

Mrs. Freidman who is also Caucasian and works with Mrs. Burnes, provided details of how it was for her to begin teaching at a majority African American school:

When I was getting interviewed there was the assistant principal. He must have been a drill sergeant. He was a colonel in the Air Force and he retired. He was African American and I came in, be bopping, be bopping, and he said right out—"How ya gonna teach Black children?" I said, "I don't know, gimme a try! I'll work on it, if not, we're good right?" And... I got hired! Every school has its culture...I was very lucky to have a parapro who was a grandmotherly type who would tell them to hush up and I would hush

up too because I thought she was talking to me! But because she was there, she helped me with the culture here. So with that parapro I had, she was with me half a day and she taught me a lot about the culture. But she also said that I didn't just stand there and yell at them. I was talking to them which was new for a teacher I guess because she felt that I was caring. I wanted her respect so bad it wasn't funny! Oh my gosh! This woman thinks I'm crazy but I'm stopping because I want to talk about this. She always said it was good we had all those talks and that they needed it. I think you have to understand some of it to know where they're coming from.

Even though Mrs. Shay came from a hard-working family like many of her students, she expressed that many of her students have experienced struggles that she never did:

Well I grew up pretty middle class family culturally. Both of my parents worked very hard and so I think I saw them they were great role models for me, being hard workers and so they instilled in me ... I always worked as a teenager, valued working hard and so I think my students' cultures... a lot of them grow up in our particular area, I know they have a lot of struggles. I mean, I know their family struggles, good people, good families, working, trying to do the best they can but because they have some struggles... I interact with them in a way that makes them ...you know, be their mama or their mama type that they don't get. We have a lot of kids raised by grandma or live with grandma or great grandma and so a lot of them definitely... their background is a little bit injured. So you might teach them or interact with them in a way that you know they have a little bit of a wounded spirit.

Mrs. Kendrick, the only African American teacher in the study, teaches at Appleton Elementary School where the African American population is one third of the total school population. She feels compassionate about all cultures but she explained how she relates to others because of her own upbringing:

I can talk to everybody. I love people. I'm very compassionate about my own cultural background. Of course I feel like I can really relate to my African American people because I was really raised in knowing about my history and sorta coming through the back end of the civil rights and in to knowing who you are as a Black person in America and so that's the way I was raised. I used to think when I was at my other school, my other school was predominantly Black, it was a low-income school and I always felt like I was needed there because I was a good role model. But when I came over to Appleton Elementary School, I realized that the diversity of having Robins Air Force Base here... and the diversity of people here... English Language Learners, last year it was Puerto Rican, Vietnamese, I mean like really a lot of people. I was still my little African American teacher self and it applied for everybody. So then I realized that it's not by culture that I am effective with my kids, but it's just because my genes, my personality, my care for them that helps them be who they are. I saw it work year after year so I had to let go of the idea that I'm needed only in an African American community because I felt like I was more effective and needed here at this school than I was at my old African American school.

Individual influences on the teachers themselves have an impact on how they see and interpret the individuals in their classrooms. Each teacher was influenced by others and has values from their own childhoods, which affect their work with students. Working hard,

developing a compassion for people, valuing your heritage, and taking the time to talk and listen with others were all reasons for understanding and treating their students in certain ways. These principles allowed the teachers to make adjustments toward a bigger goal of caring that incorporated all of their own values and standards.

## *2. Cultures of students and teachers.*

According to Nieto (2004), culture is a shared identity that includes values, traditions, social and political relationships, and a worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, or religion. Culture not only includes ethnic or racial backgrounds but also smaller circles of family, friends, and community as well.

All teachers in the present study found that it was important to be sensitive and responsive to the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. Being respectful and flexible, embracing differences, and not allowing anything negative were phrases used when asked about their responses to cultural diversity.

As stated earlier, Mrs. Kendrick is familiar with students from many different cultures in the same classroom as a host ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) inclusion classroom for several years. She noted that when she presented diverse cultures, everyone, not just her ELs, get excited in that type of learning environment. Presenting language, dance, or clothing from different cultures “encourages the different cultures to be who they are and exposes the other students to cultures they don’t know.” Mrs. Kendrick felt like it was very beneficial for her students to know “that their world is bigger than just their community.” She stated that if she knows the cultural differences of her students, she will attend to them in that

way but if not, it requires her to “ask a lot of questions.” Once she visited a nail shop to ask a Vietnamese worker about the pronunciation of certain words so that she could converse with one of her Vietnamese students. She said that it meant a lot to her student that she had taken the time to learn about her language. She believed her sincerity is shown when she visits homes, goes to dinners, attends baptisms, writes emails or notes, and takes gifts to her students and their families. In all of her school and outside interactions, she acknowledged each individual student for who they were.

Another teacher, Mrs. Moreland has found that she must be sensitive to the needs and stereotypes involved with particular cultural groups in her classroom. She allowed them to make important contributions:

I think letting their culture be a positive thing for them and allowing them to even teach others by encouraging them to make the personal connections they have to certain lessons. Then this allows them to express their views and opinions, which a lot of times will generally include their cultures.

Culture has significant meaning for two teachers, Mrs. Freidman and Mrs. Burnes, because they are Caucasian teachers working in a school with a low percentage of Caucasian students. Mrs. Freidman found that long-term family relationships have contributed to her ability to be responsive to cultural differences:

What has helped me being there so long, is that I have taught brothers and sisters and you get to know the family. If you get to know the family and you ask the family if they have something special...We have a lot of Filipino, Burmese refugees who came over from Thailand, we have Hispanic...and just asking their families to bring something in or share

with us, is going to help that whole relationship with student, parent, and teacher. You know you got to put it all together. You have to be sensitive to that because that is telling them that you care about their family. It may not be the same as what I would do and it may not be the same as what so and so would not do down the street. But it's something that is important to them and you want to stress that they are an important part of your class. The parents are an important part of the class too. So if you can get that all wrapped up together then it's really showing that you're caring about them, that you're willing to listen to them and hear the stories that they have to tell about the different diverse things that they may do in their family.

Even though none of the teachers were bilingual, limited English capabilities of students were addressed by Mrs. Burnes:

I try to learn enough that I can communicate with them but I've been lucky with my ESOL students in fifth grade where I haven't encountered one yet that wasn't fluent enough to communicate. But I try to understand their customs and where they come from just in casual conversations, just to kinda get to know how things happen at home. Because a lot of times they are uncomfortable at school. So, figure out how you can make them comfortable, as close to home as possible. Because I think that if you try to learn about them and they see you trying to learn about them, they see you care. They care about you for caring and they're thankful. So they're more apt to want to please you because you care about them. A lot of my students here that have culturally diverse backgrounds, their parents don't feel comfortable coming in a lot because they may not speak any English. So it's hard to communicate with the parents. I try to reach out to the parents as much as I can to show them that it's okay that you don't speak English but we

need to partner in this in some way. So I'll talk to our ESOL teacher and she can kinda go with and translate and relay messages that way but you have to know how...you have to have that connection at home and school to be successful. I'm thinking of an instance from last year. Once I got to know the parents I understood how much more the child needed me to care and so almost taking on the role, almost thinking of this child as my son and being there to teach those life skills that he wasn't able to be taught at home.

Four of the six teachers in the study felt that even if students identified with particular cultural groups, it did not have a particular influence on their caring practices. One of them felt that it could change how she presented academic content and the other one said it increases her awareness of placing importance on certain things. Even though each teacher felt cultural groups should be validated, they also each felt that there was a greater bond within their classroom culture like Mrs. Sperry alluded to:

Within those diverse backgrounds, it's important to create some sense of community... some commonality with all the cultures. I have found that in teaching 5th grade, we go from the Civil War to present day and so that goes through several parts of United States history where there was a lot of discrimination and prejudices. So I'm very honest about that, but I have to be sensitive to that. I share my personal experiences because I came through school during the 60's and early 70's so I have shared some experiences that were not so positive but tried to help them understand where that came from.

Mrs. Burnes put it this way:

I don't think their backgrounds really influence me because I don't see any kind of cultural differences. They're just a person so I don't think their cultural background

affects how I treat them at all. It may affect how I teach them. I may choose a different pedagogy with them but it's not going to affect how I treat them... like ESOL students, of course maybe I'll do a lot more explanation, a lot more pictures, a lot more visuals, more basic type language and things like that. So I think maybe with my students that don't come from a great home life or that don't have a lot of financial resources, offer them things at school that they don't get to experience at home like an IPAD or things like that. If I know that they don't get that experience, offer them experiences that they don't have at home.

### ***3. Diverse backgrounds of students and teachers.***

Getting to know the diverse backgrounds of students allowed teachers to individualize generalized, age group expectations to a more personal view, which gave greater insight into the needs of particular children. Teachers in the present study have used informational data and other creative ways to find out the backgrounds of their students each year. At Appleton Elementary School, four teachers reported having a "data dig" during pre-planning to find out the academic and assessment history of their students. Teachers also talked with parents and past teachers of students to find out information that is not normally included in official school documentation but provides awareness about other factors that may affect their learning and progress.

Mrs. Moreland, as a teacher of 18 students, felt that her 18 are so different because of their learning styles, prior knowledge experiences, or backgrounds. She felt that knowing the individual backgrounds of diverse students helped her relate and better care for them especially at the beginning of the year in this way:



When students walk through the door I already know information about them. From that point on, especially that first day or first week, they already know that I care for them and that I know about them. It gives them a sense of security. I've made a personal connection to them and it lets them know they're important.

Three teachers have also used a technique with parents to set up an open line of communication at the beginning of the year as well as makes personal facts available about their students. Each of these teachers sent home a letter to their students' parents telling about themselves and the letter asks for the parents to send a letter back telling about their children.

Several teachers, like Mrs. Sperry, did a name activity when school first began. A lot of student background information can be derived from the origin of a student's name or why the parents chose that particular name for the child. Mrs. Shay said that this game also lets students and teachers learn a lot of customs or cultural things about a student. All students are not comfortable with their cultural background but if a student is willing to share his culture with his classmates, Mrs. Shay allows them to help with pronunciation or teaching things unique to their culture.

Mrs. Sperry and Mrs. Burnes have used interest inventories in the past for students and have given the same interest inventory for the parents to complete about their child. This is an example of how this worked for Mrs. Burnes:

You have to really kinda do an interest inventory at the beginning of the year and get to know your students. If you have a struggling reader, get to know them and find out what they like to read. Make sure that you have those resources in your classroom library. If they're struggling at math...I have a student right now that loves electronics technology

so I can do the same lesson with him on some form of technology where if I hand him a textbook, he's not going to get anything. So you just have to get to know your kids and their interests and reach them the best way.

The teacher participants in the study attempted to understand the world of students with diverse ethnic backgrounds by reading relevant literature or just talking and observing the students and their parents. Home visits or even just a drive to their students' neighborhoods have helped several teachers understand the backgrounds of their students. Mrs. Burnes reported that meeting families in their homes or just talking with them, aids in learning about students' backgrounds:

If I can't do home visits... I try to do home visits but maybe if they're not home, I at least will do drive-bys to see where they live, meet with parents as much as possible...if I'm having trouble with a student in the classroom, talk to the parents and maybe talking to them I can figure out what the problem is and how to address it in a classroom... not necessarily asking the parent for help but having that conversation with the parent can shed light on the real problem. I can get to the real root of the problem so I can address it. Because knowing where they come from, you're able to be a lot more understanding of why they behave the way they do so you can react in a way...maybe you're not... one student is acting a certain way you may address it differently than another student who is acting that way but has a reason to be... or you know why it's becoming that way. I have a student now that if he gets in trouble and you're angry with him, and you speak angrily like you are angry with him, it will get worse. So I can't deal with him the same way I deal with other students because it's like walking on eggshells. It defuses but you just can't be as aggressive with him as some of the others because it will escalate.

Communication with parents has also been vital for Mrs. Kendrick who observed her parents' language and behaviors at parent-teacher conferences just as she would her students. She explained how she connected with parents to better understand the backgrounds of her students:

I try to bring true information and give my background. So I will say, "Yes, I'm a parent of a second grade teacher." If in some way in my community, I go to church and I know where they go to church, I try to relate to them in some way. Then I let them know I'm a big kid and I like kids—love teaching kids! So they learn to accept me like that too because I'm just forthcoming with that information and a lot of myself. Then, at times for those who need a lot of attention and even parents who need a lot of attention, I might give you my cell phone number. Or I might call you on a weekly basis, stuff like that. Because when the parents see that compassion and see that I'm willing to give up even my personal information for their child, they trust that I have the best intentions for their child.

Relating their students' backgrounds to our country or world clarifies how diversity makes for a rich classroom environment. Mrs. Moreland stated:

We have all these different countries, with all these different groups, that make up a whole... and kind of relating that, we have like a whole as a group, as a school, or a classroom, in all that's made up of all different people...so I guess ...I want students to make sure that students understand that it takes every part and every different type of person to make up...that's what makes our class...having diversity within the class is what helps us to build different social skills and build ...different lifelong skills that without

each part, meaning without each student in the class, then they wouldn't be able to do that.

All the teachers placed a priority on exploring backgrounds of new students as early as possible. The teachers in the study used school data, name activities, interest inventories, letters to and from parents, and parent conferences to find out as much as they could to help with understanding each child. These actions between the teachers and the students as well as the parents, created a strong connection of support for the benefit of the student.

#### ***4. Socioeconomic influences.***

Both schools in the present study were Title I schools which meant that a high percentage of students were disadvantaged. Teachers tried to understand the world of students with low, middle or high socioeconomic backgrounds by looking at each child and knowing that their personal worlds can be so different. This is important when building relationships with students with very different views, priorities, and values. Even students with middle or high socioeconomic backgrounds have different values of success and goals. The backgrounds of students must include a mandatory consideration of the home life for each child.

The teachers in the present study at both of the Title I schools seemed to be very aware of situations that can affect the daily lives of students. Mrs. Freidman also feels that school, for some from low socioeconomic backgrounds, is a safe place where they are provided with heat, air and food, which gives students a sense of security. As a first grade teacher with 18 years at her present school, she feels that basic needs must be met for this group:

I will say this about the low-socioeconomic backgrounds. I know for a fact, if they don't have access to good health care or good food... if they don't have those factors, it's going

to affect them physically and academically. I think you have to meet those needs first and they have to feel safe. If you don't get those, it's going to be very difficult to teach them. I would understand that they have a lot of hurdles, more so than maybe somebody in the middle or high. I'm going to be there for them—whatever it takes... whether I'm going to give you some animal crackers because you didn't have breakfast today, even though we give them free breakfast, a lot of kids don't come in till 9:30. Breakfast is done. They're starving. What am I going to do? Say, wait for lunch? No, they're not going to listen to anything I say. They're just going to put their head down and I don't want that. I keep a lot of food stuff. The things that their parents are looking for in life may be different. One might not have to worry about food. But all students are different. If you get them where they are, no matter where they are, and show them what they can accomplish, then they can do it. I don't care what economic background you are from. I think all children have different needs and you just have to know what they're needing from you... whether it's more support or whether it's just a hug in the morning.

Mrs. Burnes believed she could be helpful to her students when they are having a bad day:

I realize speaking of the Title I students that a lot of times, not all the time, they go home to a lot. I don't know what they go home to. So if they are having a bad day or if they are behaving in a way that I know that a fifth grader shouldn't behave... I think I'm more patient with them and more understanding than I would be with a student that's not Title I. A student that doesn't have a good home life ...they're not taught those life skills a lot of times so that's my job to show them how to behave.

She also had done some outside reading to find ways to reach out to her students:

I've read a lot on poverty because that's the area I choose to work in. That's kinda my passion, working with students in poverty because a lot of times they don't see that they can get out, that they can do better. It's a cycle that they can break.

She continued to say that some students on the high end of a socioeconomic status may have similar needs:

I think that students from a low socioeconomic background often times need their teacher more because maybe they have fabulous parents but they're not home a lot because they're working their third or fourth jobs. So I think a lot of times they need their teachers as a parent figure almost to guide them. They don't have a lot of guidance at home, not because their parents don't care, but because they're just not able to be there. So I think they need teachers a lot. On the flip side I can imagine that students with a high socioeconomic background may need their teachers just as much for the same reason. Maybe their parents are workaholics so they're not home either to guide their children. So it may not even be a matter of socioeconomic backgrounds but just a matter of if the parents are there enough to guide them, identifying how they are behaving, the skills they lack in life or to just mentor them while you're teaching, in the hallway, at specials time... just being a mentor and showing them that you care and that there are different ways that they can handle things.

One teacher, Mrs. Shay, felt that organizational skills or homework requirements may have to be adjusted due to unsupportive home lives. She has also done professional learning on books about poverty to help her understand decisions students and parents may make because of

their socioeconomic status. Yet, she explained that sometimes the students with low-socioeconomic backgrounds are more mature than others more economically advantaged because of having chores and taking care of siblings. These students often have had to face things and she described how this influences students in other ways:

I would just say the biggest need is, just kind of emotional needs for those students. A lot of the lower ones don't live with two parent families or one might be disabled or one might live with their grandparents. Hard times. As I say, broken spirit-hard times can bring a broken spirit so I think you're teaching the whole child. You have to understand what you know and what that might be about as well.

Mrs. Sperry testified to the differences she has seen this year because of a new class structuring system. One classroom per grade level at her school is devoted to "high achievers" that have performed well on a talented and gifted screener. This is the first year of implementation and in prior years students identified as gifted would only meet once a week with a teacher that had a gifted endorsement. Now all the "gifted" students are together in a classroom every day. Mrs. Sperry is not one of the talented and gifted teachers for her grade level and made this observation about student-led conference day and some recent severe weather days:

There are different values. You know when we did that parent teacher conference and we had that one classroom in 5th grade (talented and gifted classroom)? Almost every parent showed up to have a conference. Our EIP (Early Intervention Program), our two special education classes—we didn't even have like 40 percent. You know what? I also saw that when we came back from the break and on Tuesday when it was so cold? We had a lot

more absences. So when I'm thinking about students that come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, the values of education are different. Marcie's class (talented and gifted) only had maybe two or three absent and we had eight. So it's easy to make excuses for them. It's really interesting, the differences... they're bringing in the lack of background experiences or experiences. They don't have examples and so you've got to provide that for them. I think about some of the kindergarten teachers or some of the Pre-K teachers, and they're not even sure of how to hold a book because they've not had books in their hands or they've not seen their parents you know or anything like that... You know some of our students have never looked at a map. They've never been to the beach, to start talking about weathering erosion on the beach.... So with those different background experiences or lack of, I do my best to provide them with experiences that will help them be successful. As a teacher, I really need to be aware of what they have experienced and what they haven't so I need to take up that slack.

Socioeconomic influences can be directly related to lack of monetary resources or other related issues. Both of the Title I schools in the present study provide free breakfast and lunch meals but one teacher still found it necessary to help with student breakfast meals because the students do not always get to school in time for the school breakfast. The socioeconomic status of students seemed to have other factors not related to family financial levels that create areas of need for teacher support. Parents may be less available or supportive to students' personal and academic needs due to working extra jobs, lack of transportation, and different values than the teachers about education. Students may need more help at school with life skills or prior knowledge of experiences.



## **Summary**

The teachers in the present study spoke of their jobs as teachers of many students yet had the ability to hone in and focus on individual students. They admitted that their own backgrounds and cultures sometimes affected the way they were as a person, which spills over into their personality as a teacher influencing their behaviors and character. Cultural differences of students were recognized for specific instructional purposes but did not always have an effect on how teachers individually treated students. All the teachers are at Title I schools and recognized different values they have experienced with students in their classrooms.

In the next section, I discuss the roles that teachers take in schools. This section reports the fourth and final major theme concerning the “mentoring roles” that are often self-prescribed and not the related to the “technical” aspect of teacher effectiveness. These mentoring roles involve communication and are relationship based.

## **IV. Teachers as Caring Mentors**

Mentoring in schools involves situations of one person supporting and encouraging another person to manage their own learning to maximize their potential. In the present study, all the teachers voluntarily chose to put themselves in situations where they felt a mentoring role provided the best possible way to help students achieve. Invariably, mentoring led to caring relationships between teachers and students.

Mentoring relationships were the cumulative result of teachers’ beliefs and values about unique successful learners when these beliefs and values are put into practice in their classrooms. The three earlier themes of broad view of effective teaching, teacher efficacy beliefs, and students as unique individuals within social contexts, are intertwined with the theme of teachers

as caring mentors. In other words, the teachers' beliefs about successful learners, which focused on individuality and the craft of effective teaching practices, happened through teacher-student relationships. Relationships that take on the role of mentoring were a direct result of caring beliefs and practices with students. This section is divided into four smaller sections: the importance of caring, caring relationships, universal caring, and how caring supports achievement.

### **A. Importance of caring.**

Noddings (1984) defined caring as a natural, affective response between humans. Later, she stated that caring in education happens when teachers strive to establish and maintain caring relations, which provide a foundation for everything the teacher and student do together (Noddings, 2005). From the interviews and observations, it was obvious that the teachers showed sincere concern and empathy for the students in their classes. Caring in education is a teacher taking the time to develop relationships with students in addition to pursuing certain academic goals. It has been debated if caring belongs in schools but Mrs. Shay felt that caring may be a missing link in the lives of many underachieving students. Her statement about showing care through a mentoring relationship provided a valid point, especially concerning achievement:

I know a lot of underachieving students that may not have that in their lives. So that may be the one factor that pushes them to that next level. They may just need to know that somebody cares about them and believes in them to achieve.

In the present study, teachers discussed how to show care from an instructional viewpoint while simultaneously providing care that was sensitive to students' personal needs. In other words, teachers felt responsible for the technical aspects of teaching, which is often the area used

as an accountability measure for being an effective teacher. At the same time, the teachers also felt responsible for establishing and maintaining caring relationships with their students. This is consistent with the view of the language of the technical versus the language of the expressive (Prillaman, Eaker, & Kendrick, 1994). Consequently, these two aspects of caring in the classroom emerged through the interviews and provided a focus for the first section: caring about academics and caring about life skills.

### *1. Caring as an academic motivator.*

Noddings' (1988) concept of moral education emphasizes that teachers need to be concerned with what their students know and that teachers should model caring when they are concerned with students' academic achievement. Every participant in the present study felt that teacher caring and student achievement were very closely interrelated. Caring from the teacher to the student was seen as a motivational precursor to student achievement. Each teacher described how their caring actions were interpreted by students who then in turn became motivated to achieve. One teacher, Mrs. Moreland, put it like this:

As I work with students, especially underachievers, and even just middle of the line students or any students, it builds up a positive environment. It makes them want to learn and want to be successful. I feel like part of how I care for them is not that I am just concerned for them but I want them to do well. I want for them to be successful and so it kinda builds and motivates them to do well. It brings self-motivation and builds that self-motivation and self-efficacy to go with it. So therefore they want to learn and they want to achieve to make me proud and they want to build that pride within themselves.

Another teacher, Mrs. Sperry, suggested that caring in the form of a rapport that has been built with the student along with encouragement resulted in the students working harder. That renewed work ethic resulted in higher student achievement. She continued to explain her meaning of achievement:

I'm thinking of some of the students, where they come from at the very beginning of the school year. When I'm thinking about student achievement and the growth, I'm realistic enough to know that all students are not going to have that same amount of growth. But I do know that when there has been support there for them and that relationship has been built, there is going to be growth. It is not going to be the same as everybody else. But they're going to be able to leave feeling like I could not do this but I can do this now. I kinda struggled with that a little bit, thinking of achievement and the success because the success is not going to be the same for every one of them. It might not even be passing the CRCT or the writing test but there's going to be some achievement and some growth. It might not be what our state says there has to be for success.

As discussed earlier, one very prominent aspect of caring concerning academics is finding out what each student needs and allowing that to be the curriculum for that child. Mrs. Burnes differentiated by learning styles, ability, and focus groups.

Today during writing time I had students writing. I had one student at the board editing a paragraph because he has trouble with punctuation and grammar. Then I had another student looking at different pieces and she was identifying the genre because she wasn't clear on which genre goes...actually it was my ESOL student today looking at different

pieces. She had to tell which genre they were so they were working on a task but there were three or maybe four students working on another assignment.

Spending time with individual students and learning what they need is how Mrs. Shay believed teachers help students:

Through student interest they can support, through learning styles, how they learn the best, they can gradual release where they work toward independence, they can support it through getting them in a just right book, and making sure they have a reading level book that's appropriate to them. If needed, they can read the test questions. That way it's not just a Reading test in Social studies or Science but what they actually know.

Mrs. Kendrick emphasized that ELs, are “way behind sometimes” but that the caring teacher part really does bring them along the way. She utilized a variety of methods to help her ELs progress:

I allow my EL students to use the computers and technology. That will take them to a lower grade level so that they can build their vocabulary or build their knowledge of English learning while other students attend to their own learning assignments. That might not always be computer assignments or technology. I use a lot of listening centers and things like that or pictures to meet the instructional needs for that child and where they need it. Some are higher than others. That's what I do. I also use my students, my English students to be like peer tutors... to say “Hey no, this is really what it is or this is how you say that or this is how you really do that...” because sometimes children are their best teachers.

Her experiences with ELs and other students have made a distinct correlation between achievement and caring in her mind because “you can’t have one without the other.”

## ***2. Caring for emotional needs and life skills.***

According to the participants in this study, the emotional needs of all students not related to academics, especially underachieving students, seem to be far-reaching and varied. The needs usually involve the affective, or emotional, domain of learning. The affective domain is the critical component of learning that encourages students to show a willingness to listen, participate, be involved and finally change their behaviors.

The first grade teacher, Mrs. Freidman, discussed earlier about first graders having basic needs like food to feel secure. The two third grade teachers recognized students wanting a sense of security and attention in the classroom. According to the fifth grade teachers, as the students grow older, it seemed that many of their needs centered on emotions or affective feelings that come with a negative sense of self. Mrs. Shay, a fifth grade teacher, identified many of these needs such as: the need to be valued, to feel good about themselves, to feel smart, to feel like their answer is on the right track or that someone is listening to them. She emphasized that these students usually already know that they are behind so they look for self-worth and strive to feel like they are not inadequate.

Knowing typical characteristics of a certain age group but still finding out unique differences is very important according to Mrs. Shay:

You have to know an age group enough to know when to talk, when to call them out.

You have to know them well enough to know how are they going to react to certain situations. Do they want to be put on the spot or do they not want to be put on the spot?

You have to kind of know those little things about them. Are they an easy crier? Is there an easy strategy that you could do for them? Small touches. You think about your Grandmamma who always knows. She always has just the right thing in the refrigerator or when you go over to her house. You just kinda got to know what makes them work through the day. Underachieving students don't get that. They don't feel that. That makes them feel good, makes them feel appreciated.

Another fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Sperry, confirmed similar needs and added to the list of needs she has noticed with her students: to feel important, to feel like they can achieve and contribute to the classroom even if it might be something small.

Mrs. Kendrick changed her way of thinking about her students' needs as she became more experienced and grew as a teacher.

I know that my first couple of years, it might have been that my focus was on myself and my duties. So I may not have seen as many students achieve as much. But once I became comfortable as a teacher and comfortable in my abilities, I was able to give more attention and care to my students, saw that's what really helps them and tends to their needs. Then I saw the improvement in their achievement year to year.

Now she is certain that it is necessary for herself and others to ensure students know they care, even through their body language, like smiling, touching, pats on the back and high fives. Mrs. Moreland took the time to greet each student in the morning and see how his or her day was going and got the day started on a positive note.

One of the easiest ways to show you care is just talking with students, talking with them, asking about their lives, asking how they're doing, greeting them like I try to do each

morning. So, I automatically know how their day has started you know. I might need to talk to them to see how they got started, how the morning has gone. If it's a bad morning, then I kinda get our day started on the right foot. So I think talking with them even when they're facing conflict and when they are struggling with something. Just sitting beside them and helping to guide them through, sometimes is the support that they need and they want. They want somebody who is kinda a team player with them, to say I'm here to go with you through this, alright?

Even though she tried to address possible emotional impediments to the academic day, Mrs. Moreland has found that throughout the day, her strugglers' hard work builds their character for future obstacles. This extra work does necessitate the need for extra relaxation time:

If they are struggling with something in class, they have to work harder at it. They have to continue to practice. They need to work diligently to achieve the goal that they set for themselves. Then they are learning skills of goal setting. They're leaning those skills of persistence and it's exactly what when we're facing hard times as adults we need to have the values within us. I think for underachieving students they need extra support. They need time with the teacher to kinda have a break in their day. Not necessarily a time with their teacher, but they need kind of a break in their day. They're struggling all day long to keep up and work at the pace everybody else in the class is doing it. I think that you gotta realize as teachers how much we press and press and press. We've got to give them a little release and so I think giving them some downtime is showing them that you are caring about how they're feeling at the moment... positive reinforcement...especially looking into things that they're interested and trying to provide either resources or tools that are based on their interest.



Mrs. Burnes saw that it is hard for her students to work alone because of their needs:

I have a lot of girls this year and so they want a lot of attention. So while I try to make them become more independent, I also see that they're needing more of my time this year and my attention. So I have to give them a lot of time and attention because I think they need that.

Mrs. Burnes shared about one student she worked with who lacks confidence in her abilities:

I have a student right now that doubts herself a lot, every subject, every day. I get to her and then the next day there's another problem. So I'm just trying right now with her that she matters. Because I don't feel like she thinks she does. I don't know that she feels like anyone else thinks that she matters. So I'm showing her you're acting like this and that is not like a lady and that is not how you should be acting. So you matter and you need to care about yourself before anyone else can begin to or before you can believe anyone else does care.

### **B. Caring relationships.**

Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism provided a general theoretical framework for the present study of effective teachers' caring beliefs and practices. Learning is not an independent process but a social construction of mutually shared meanings between the teacher and the student consistent with the theory of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky recognized the important idea of social interaction being meshed with language, content, and thought. The teachers in the present study embodied this view of how interactive learning

activities promote interpersonal connections that may have profound consequences on students' development and academic success.

I begin this section with responses from two protocol questions that supplied a wealth of knowledge from the teachers about relationships. First, I began with the participants defining their relationships with the children in their classrooms, specifically answering this question: How would you define a caring teacher-student relationship? Next, I followed with their narratives that answered this question: What role does having a caring relationship with students play in being an effective teacher, especially underachievers? Last, I discussed two increasingly common circumstances in which teachers must take on very strong roles in their relationships: difficult situations and parental roles.

Here are the teachers' definitions of a caring teacher-student relationship:

Mrs. Shay—It would have a lot to do with trust. They have to know that they can trust me and I have to know that I can trust them to work to their potential.

Mrs. Sperry—I think there's gotta be trust between the student and the teacher. You've got to build that rapport with them so the student feels like they can talk to the teacher and the teacher is going to actively listen. So when the students are talking to them, the teacher's attention is not diverted and that's hard. Because sometimes that means that I've got to stop grading papers or I've gotta you know, make that time for them to actively listen. So, therefore, when I'm doing that, I can act on what they're telling me. I'm finding that a lot of our students are living lives that I cannot even imagine. They're not coming to just tell me something for a story. They're really saying "help." I need some help. I'm

bothered with this and so the trust has to be there. The rapport has to be there. You know, actively listen to them so they can feel like they're supported and encouraged.

Mrs. Freidman—I would define it as having a student that is comfortable, feels comfortable enough to talk to a teacher about something that is bothering them or needing some help or just talking out something with the teacher. I think if they feel comfortable doing that then you have that bond already

Mrs. Kendrick—A caring teacher student relationship would probably look like a student who comes to school and enjoys coming to school. And a teacher who enjoys being with that student and doesn't mind dealing with the student as they are, who is functional day to day, who is able to get things done in a timely manner with each other, and also who understands for the children's sake what it is that they bring to school each day. They have confidence in the teacher and they just show a respectful relationship whether they are in your classroom or not.

Mrs. Burnes—I think that the students have to be able to trust the teacher. So the teacher has to form that bond and let them know that they can trust them but also respect. You need to show your students respect so that they in turn will show you respect. Because what I've learned is that, if they don't like you, you're not getting through to them.

Mrs. Moreland—I think it's a relationship that's built on trust and honesty and you know it when working with students. I feel like it's just as important to be just as honest about what they have to learn and what their strengths are as well as with their weaknesses. Talk to them about how to move and how to get from one level to the next.

The teachers defined their relationships with their students using words like trust and respect. Mutual trust and respect inevitably places the teachers in particular positions that further defines this type of relationship. Here are the replies from the teachers in the study when asked, what role does having a caring relationship with students play in being an effective teacher, especially underachievers?

Mrs. Shay—I would think that a caring relationship has everything to do with being an effective teacher. They have to know that you care about them in order for them to want to work for you.

Mrs. Freidman—I think it has a very big role, being a caring teacher. I think that's really how you get them on board. There has to be buy in from students to the teacher. The way you do that is definitely talk and listen to them, complimenting them. But also giving direct feedback as to where we're going next. I mean just things like that you know. General demeanor with the students so they know that you care and even when you discipline them they know why. You're not doing it because "you hate me." She's doing it because she wants me to do well.

Mrs. Burnes—They have to know you care because a lot of times they don't have that at home. They have to know that someone cares. So if they know you care and they know you are behind them and they know that you have expectations of them...even if nobody else does...they're more apt to try their hardest if they know you're kinda rooting for them.

Mrs. Sperry—I think that the underachieving students have to know that the teacher is there for them. They have to know that the teacher is going to have their back. I try to be

very honest with those students and let them know you're struggling here but also pointing out where they've come from and where they can go you know...the steps...the caring... is essential for that...letting them know I'm there for support... letting them know I've got their back... building that trust with them.

Mrs. Moreland—I just think that one of the biggest foundations of that is letting them know that I care about each one of them and build relationships with them. Then they can model the practices that I've put forth from between teacher and student, being able to build that between student and student. I think it just helps to build that safe environment for students to be able to trust me and to understand that I have their best interest in mind. I'm just here as a as a support and help to guide them in their education.

Mrs. Kendrick—I think that my personality comes across as sincere and genuine. For underachieving students, a lot of the time, that's just a space that needs to be filled for them. So when they see you have compassion or that you care for them, they put forth a little bit more effort even if they can't succeed academically. Their efforts are there. They really do seem to try sometimes. Now that doesn't work for all of them but for the most part, that's what works.

Mrs. Shay noted that she builds caring relationships with her students by building on their strengths and interests in academics and taking the time to support their outside activities.

I check in with them often. I pull them small group if needed. I make sure they have the right Language Arts level book that's comfortable. I'll go to their game if they have a game outside of school. If I find a special book that they have an interest in, I put it on their desk with a note, things like that.

Caring comes easy for Mrs. Kendrick. She feels like it is a natural response to others, even for students not in her classroom. Whenever she sees a need, she reacts in a caring way “despite what others think.”

Underachieving students must know you care or they may not even attempt to learn. You want all your students to progress through the year. But underachieving (students) it’s important because you want to bring them up where they need to be. So that they can get what they need for that particular grade level. They just don’t have a sense or even any reason to try. So you know that’s why it’s so crucial. That’s why it’s so important. That’s why if you didn’t care, the students can sense that. They might learn to not care and continue to not care about their own expectations of what they need to do or their own values and all of that. They just give up. They need it. They have so many things that they already can’t achieve. So if you show them that they can care for themselves and others, then that will just help them along the way.

Many of the teachers gave similar responses when asked about caring for students and building relationships with students. Mrs. Burnes’ replies were an example of how she showed she cared:

I don’t talk down to my students. If they don’t understand something, we’ll talk about it. I encourage them to work with a peer. Maybe if they are not understanding something, I’ll encourage them to ask a student near them. Or try to kinda teach them conversational skills within the classroom. So I just think that I’m very calm with them. If they do start to misbehave, get angry, or if I can tell they are about to get emotional, instead of kinda blowing it up, I try to be calm and defuse the situation and let them know that I

understand that you're upset. I understand. Let them know that you're a person too, you have those feelings too, and that we're going to work through them and learn how to work through them.

Mrs. Burnes continued with this type of rapport, which builds relationships by having conversations with her students:

I just kinda talk to them like they're people, not kids. I talk to them like they are another human being and not just a kid. I don't talk down to them. I just make sure that they know that I value them as a person and not just a student in my classroom.

Mrs. Sperry believed that it is important to look outside of school when building relationships with students.

I know that I have made over the years many trips to ball games. I can remember little Charles last year, Jarius and others. That's what their love was, football, and to be able to try to build that relationship... I know I've gone to baseball games, football games, piano recitals, dance recitals. I've tried to show an interest in their life outside of school. You know by 5th grade, we've got siblings that are born and parents that are remarrying, things like that. Looking at pictures, just having a conversation with them about something besides school sometimes.

### ***1. Reaching hard to reach students.***

Connecting with students that are difficult to reach can be extremely challenging for teachers tasked with annual student progress. As discussed earlier, teachers listed a myriad of circumstances that can create problematic times for teachers and students when it carries over

into the classroom. Taking the time to inquire about a student's interest has given Mrs. Sperry a way to help with children who are hard to connect with:

Find their interest. Find something that they love. Find something that would motivate them. It might be something like you know, I don't know...if you remember Mark French... He was not motivated at all to do science or social studies or anything like that even though he was brilliant. That paper and text just did nothing for him. But if we were studying the turning points in the Civil War, then he could get on a computer, find it, and he would get the same information. He could come in and lead or start our conversation. But find their interest... and his interest was in technologies.

Mrs. Freidman resolves each year to find ways to bond with hard to reach students in her class and also seeks out their interests to build a common link:

I try different behavior strategies. Some of them don't work with the pulling of clips or the Class DOJO. We have to do the behavior checklist. I keep them (students) with me, keep them close to me. I ask them to help me with things, little stuff like that. But I don't do it to the point where that's a reward. If someone is trying to get away from me, it's like, oh, oh, quick! Quick turn on the light and come on back! It's like what we do with toddlers. You distract. You just kinda focus them in a different direction. What I do, if by November or December, I am glad that they're leaving for Christmas break...then my New Year's resolution is always with the students: you will get to know and personally connect with this student, this student, this student. Because you sure didn't do a good job of it the first five months of school! That's my New Year's resolution every year. So that's who I hit, the first ones. I just go up to them and we have to find something to bond



with. We have to find something that we have in common. Even if all of sudden, I love Angry Birds now because you love Angry Birds. I saw a book about that. You know you have to find that common ground, you really do.

Mrs. Burnes reached out to her challenging students so that learning can take place:

I just kinda let them know that I know what they're going through. I know that you're really angry right now. I know that a lot of times students will shut down. I'm thinking of one student in particular who was in second grade. He was supposed to be in fourth grade and he was reading below kindergarten level. He had just shut down. A lot of the teachers that I worked with that had him before me, had said, "Don't even bother. Don't worry about him." So by the end of the year, by letting him know that I care, he was writing stories and reading almost on grade level by the end of the year. That was one story that I can tell was a big success in my classroom because he came angry to school and he was a behavior problem. In the end, he realized, hey, she cares about me and I'm not going to treat her that way or I don't have to act like this in her room. The chip on his shoulder, he took it off so he was able to learn after that.

Mrs. Kendrick talked honestly to her difficult students and then, if needed, found ways to channel negative behaviors into positive actions:

Have a heart to heart talk with them. Like I have a little girl whose dad was in jail and I don't shy away from that. Some teachers might be afraid to talk about that because it's sensitive. But I have experienced this and I can relate to these kids a lot. I was raised in a community a lot like their own so I don't have a problem in asking about it or saying something about it. If they don't and they're not forthcoming, then I ask them to write

about it in a journal or draw a picture about it. If I see that there's something that can get them to talk more like... one child wouldn't talk at all. His dad was deployed to Afghanistan. He wouldn't talk at all. He was a very bright student and I needed to talk with him about his writing. I needed to conference about it and talk about it and he couldn't. But he would talk about drawing and painting so I went to like a second-hand store and bought a painter's little thingy for him. That's one way we could talk. Even now he's gone to the next grade level. Again he's not talking but he'll come to talk to me. You know, just find ways to connect personally to make them feel comfortable with who they are. I seem to have a lot of those kids (difficult) and I don't know how they keep coming to me but I try to treat them like they're at home and relate to them that way. Then I tell them like, yeah, I've heard some things about you but that's gonna change. I prove to them, this is why you think that, because you did this or because you did that. Now how or what are we going to do different? If they're considered bad I try to make them leaders. Go run this errand, go help this group to try to change their behaviors. That just shows them, this is how you need to use that energy or this is how you need to do that. So really just like breaking it down to really understand how can you change your behaviors to make it positive as opposed to negative? That doesn't always work. Then I go on to parent conferences and such and so on.

## ***2. Teachers as parental figures.***

Numerous family conditions in our current society such as absent or single parents, blended families, incarcerated parents and homelessness have contributed to today's students missing out on some of the parenting guidance typically provided by two parent families in the past. Teachers in the present study, found it necessary to fill this gap of parenting, especially

with “at-risk” or underachieving students. Mrs. Sperry thought of her students as her own when she was caring for them:

I think that they know, kinda like your own children, they know you care for them because you set up procedures in your classroom to provide that structure. So when they come in there they know. Like our own personal children, if we didn't set those limits and we were just kinda laid back and lenient.

Several of the teachers felt that teaching social skills or life skills at school were an important part of caring with underachievers. Mrs. Freidman tried to get her students to see acceptable behaviors for school:

I think it's important for me to be a caring teacher with all of my students whether they are underachieving or not. The underachievers need more ... some of them may not get positive reinforcement at home as much as other students do. That doesn't mean their parents love them less, it's just different. You want them to understand there may be things they are allowed to do at home but the rules are not the same at school. There are two places. Where it may be ok for you to punch someone back if they hit you at home. But it's not okay if you do that at school. We have a lot of social skills. We tend to. Do you want them to trust you? You want them to buy into. You are there for them. Because you really are.

If a student had a disruptive home life, Mrs. Freidman made sure that her students knew that she would help make everything okay while they were at school:

I'll be honest with you, I'm not upset if kids don't have a pencil or didn't bring something in from home that they needed, I have all the materials there so no one has to worry about

them having supplies. They are there. You lose one, here's another, I mean I understand that children do need to learn responsibility but in some of the homes that's not necessarily true. But by the same token there are homes that put me to shame, they really do. Because they're neat and everything is put away. Those kids of course, are being taught you drop it, you put it up. There's so many of them that don't. It's not really with the parents. They may have trouble staying in an apartment. They may be homeless. You don't know that and why sweat "Oh, you didn't bring a pencil? Oh my!" or "You didn't do your homework?" "I'm terrible!" I just say, "Go home and do it, or if you want, come in earlier and let's see if we can work it out." See, I don't sweat that small stuff. Students need to know that you have their back. You know that they can come in the way they are at any stage, whether they're angry, upset, whether they're happy or sad, whether they lost everything and they know everything will be okay.

Mrs. Burnes thought she had done well when her students opened up to her like she was their parent and even accidentally call her "Mama!" She reported that a lot of her girls think of her like their own mother:

Having so many girls this year, I do think they see me as a mother figure. They'll also open up to you about things that are going on in their life... or having fifth graders ...they're starting to mature and develop and come of age so they'll open up to you about things that they probably wouldn't if they didn't trust you or know that you care.

### **C. Universal caring.**

Universal caring is a natural phenomenon occurring in the human condition, by which "we recognize human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence"

(Noddings, 1984, p. 4). Noddings' definition of universal caring leads to the belief that humans have an inborn need to connect with and relate to others. This idea of caring for others and being cared for, gives humans meaning and purpose in life. In the present study, universal caring was notably recognized when teachers were asked about caring for different cultural groups. Several teachers felt that if students identified with a particular cultural group, it did not have any particular influence on how they related to these students. This seems contradictory to some beliefs already reported earlier in the present study. Actually, it brings to light the larger context of universal caring.

Mrs. Shay spoke of a learning spirit that values all cultural groups and not just your own. Even though she admitted she should be sensitive to cultural differences, Mrs. Sperry felt like she had her own caring ways for her students just because they were in her room. Mrs. Kendrick was very compassionate about her own cultural background but felt like her personal philosophy of caring for others "helps them be who they are" applies to everyone regardless of their cultures. When Mrs. Shay tried to describe caring for distinct cultural groups, she said you just "celebrate all kinds of cultures" and find good role models to use as examples. Mrs. Sperry also agreed that when you attempt to be sensitive and responsive to diverse backgrounds, you relied on your expertise on the type of caring that has worked for all of your students:

I think it just goes back to trying to be positive, encouraging them, supporting them, letting them know that they can learn. I try to be responsive to the diverse backgrounds. You know trying to understand where they came from, how they might learn differently, or how they might process things differently which is going to lead me to work a little harder to find their learning style.

When Mrs. Freidman responded to the same question about attempts to being sensitive to diverse backgrounds, she replied “that as a teacher you have to...that’s what caring is, understanding and asking questions and getting to know them.” Yet she does not feel that if her students identify with a particular cultural group that it has any particular influence on how she relates to them. Her method of caring for all students now comes easy for her:

I think I've done it for so long that I'm not conscious of it. I just do what I've always been doing because it appears to have worked. I don't know, I just think like I said, I just naturally do it now. Caring, like I said before, showing that you are interested in what goes on in their lives and that you want them to be successful. It doesn't matter really where they're coming from. They have to understand that I want the best for them.

Even though Mrs. Freidman felt her experience has shown her it is not hard to care for her diverse students, she does not believe she can totally understand their world because she has not been through what they have.

Every year it's something new. I do it all over again. It's supposed to get easier but every year it's different. That's why I may have trouble identifying the cultures in my group right now because it is what they give me and what I give back. Every year it's different. So I'm still gonna do the same things, still talk to them, still learn, talk to parents and find out all that stuff that is interesting about their culture. But I don't know. I guess I don't know if I truly understand it because I do not come from that background. I can understand what I need to do for them to make them feel like they're being cared for and I want the best for them.

Mrs. Kendrick responded to the different needs of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds by being the same way with all of her students:

I'm just so real! Like if it's something that I can do, I let them know this is what I can do. So if you're from a low background or middle or high or whatever, this is what I can do for you. But for those students who need support from the teacher just the same, however we function in the room: knowing the whole child, knowing what their needs are, identifying their needs, knowing what they are and encouraging students not only to be successful in that lower level, continue to track them, observe them, and give them the resources they need to move and progress. That just changes so much and the best way to do that is through computer lab technology ways that will help me monitor so I can focus on the strategy.

Mrs. Burnes noted that cultural backgrounds are not a reason that could affect how she treats students because they are all people. When describing caring for cultural groups, she wanted to show them what they may need, what they may not always see, what acceptable behavior is, and that they no matter what, they can be successful if they put their mind to it and try so don't fall into a cycle. She admitted though that she may have to teach in a different way due to things like low language proficiency.

#### **D. Caring supports achievement.**

In the present study, teachers described student achievement in two contrasting ways. Achievement was seen in an objective way as a percentage of students or subgroups who meet or exceed the proficient level on state-wide academic assessments mandated by legislation that measures AYP progress or graduation rates. Achievement was used also subjectively by

teachers when describing the individual academic progress or success of students who did not necessarily meet or exceed particular levels on state assessments, test scores, or even grades. This broad view of student achievement allowed teachers to not only care about student test scores but also to care about students' individual achievements.

In this section, I first give a few examples of teachers speaking specifically about how caring relationships support student achievement. Next, I share stories from the teachers about individual students that have crossed their paths. These stories were shared when I asked the teachers to end their interviews by telling me about success stories from their teaching experiences. I feel as if these stories are the best way to represent how caring and achievement overlap in the context of a classroom and to end my chapter of findings. As you will see, the teachers built caring relationships with these particular students who experienced success or achievement in their classrooms.

Mrs. Shay remembered her own teachers and believed that this impacted how she cared for them. She showed that she cared for students by incorporating their interests into the class work and paying special attention to them. She thought that if you cared for your students, they would work harder for you:

I think about my life, my schooling, and those teachers that I remember. I knew that they cared about me. It doesn't mean that they were a pushover but I knew that they truly cared about me as a person. They cared about me educationally. So I work to go to students' games and I ask particular questions about things I know they're interested in to bring in student interest. I think it's like anybody, any relationship. If you feel like someone cares for you then you are going to work harder for them. I want so much for



students to do well. I want them to be productive citizens. So I care about that in the sense that I talk about their interests. I find things that they're interested in. I get to know them as a person. I go to their games. I go to their meets. You know I pull special books for them. I write special notes on their writing. You know I push them in a way... achievement, for especially underachievers, is everything. They got to be able to get out of where they are at. So the only way to do that is to feel success. So hopefully my goal is to be able to make them feel success. Some of them have never felt successful and so unless you feel it and know what it feels like, you never strive to get there.

Mrs. Freidman loved seeing her students achieve because it gave them a chance to be successful. She was willing to make adjustments to enable her students to achieve:

When you teach in Title I schools, you're in a unique situation. Very unique because you will have students that you see that light bulb go on. It happens in others schools. I know it does, but every day, every day, there's a light bulb going on, every single day. When you get that, it's the most amazing feeling you can have! It really is! It makes you think wow! Look what he did! I started teaching at Brighton Elementary wanting to take all the kids home with me. That's wrong. I now go into it saying, it is what it is. Their life is their life. If I can help in any way, I will. But if I teach them to read, they've got it. We're their chance. I don't want to sound like I'm the knight in shining armor because I'm not, I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying my job is to make sure they are achieving, that's it. You have to be able to bend with some of the things that you do to make sure that they get that way.

Mrs. Moreland showed she cared about her students, especially underachievers by building relationships and bonding with them. Her caring helped underachievers to overcome their resistance and motivated them to learn:

I think that it builds a positive atmosphere. It makes them once again see that I have in their best interest at hand. They have got to know that I care about them. I want to be a helper and a support to them, especially with underachieving students. They may have resistance. So you got to build that bond with them in order for them to even kind of come to the side of being willing to learn, wanting to learn, and want to be successful. I feel like part of as I show I care for them, is that I care for them. Not that I just am concerned for them but I want them to do well. You and I want for them to be successful. So it kinda of builds, it kinda motivates them to do well and brings some of that self-motivation and builds that self-motivation and self-efficacy “to go with it!” So therefore they want to learn. They want to achieve to make me proud. They want to build that pride within themselves. When it comes to looking at the areas that they need to achieve, I try to analyze different data and look at what is it that they truly want to know. Because I truly value their time and their interest. So I want to make the most of their time. I want to see what it is that they are needing help on instead of just teaching to the whole group and teaching something they already know.

All the students in the six teachers’ past classrooms contributed in some small way to the narratives in the present study. However, certain students have made powerful impressions on some of the teachers and these experiences stand out when the teachers were asked to reflect upon students who made huge personal and academic growth during a school year. These are stories of achievement from Mrs. Burnes, Mrs. Shay, Mrs. Freidman, and Mrs. Kendrick.

### **Stories of Achievement**

Mrs. Burnes is a fifth grade teacher at Brighton Elementary who took on the challenge of a new student who had recently moved to Georgia and was academically far behind his peers.

Mrs. Burnes built confidence in him by giving sincere praise for the smallest progress and strengths. She provided him with numerous opportunities to show growth and validated his strong writing abilities by showing him how he could put his thoughts on paper become a writer himself. Mrs. Burnes' caring allowed this student to grow as a person and a student as shown by his CRCT scores and success as a writer.

#### **A Struggler**

I had a student last year. He was very low academically. He came to me, he couldn't read. He struggled in math. He had no motivation and it's because he had lost all hope in himself. He would tell me, I'm stupid, I'm dumb, I can't do this, or you know, I'm so dumb. So I did a lot of self-esteem building with him because no, you're not... and any little thing that I could find to praise. If he did it, didn't matter how small it was, anything I could find to praise him on or any strength that I could find. I gave him every opportunity to do it. He was a fabulous writer. He just couldn't write. He could tell a phenomenal story but he couldn't get the words on the paper. So I started out with him where he would tell me the story and I would write it. Then I would skip lines and he would kinda copy under it. Then it got to the point where he would tell me the story, I would write it and he would have to transfer it to a different sheet of paper. Then eventually he was writing. He passed all parts of the CRCT last year. He was well below grade level and had already been held back before I know at least once, maybe twice. He had come to us from New York so we didn't have a lot of documentation. I ended up

going through the channels and getting him placed SPED (Special Education) for LD (Learning Disabled) but he still was very successful last year. I think I saw him grow academically but I saw him grow as a person so much. That meant more to me, seeing him care more about himself as a person. I don't think he did at the beginning at all so I would consider that a success story.

Mrs. Shay is a fifth grade teacher at Appleton Elementary who went way beyond the call of duty to help a special education student who was also in the midst of a personal crisis. Her student was nonverbal and homeless but Mrs. Shay took on a parental role and made him feel welcome at school and home. She also discussed future decisions about staying in school and career options. He is still in school and able to perform grade level work because Mrs. Shay took the time to care by providing him with support as a person and a student.

#### A Fifth Grade Boy

I think of Mark. I don't know academically how he is in school. He is on grade level. I taught Mark in 5th grade. He was pretty much nonverbal. He was served Special Ed in all of his areas and he was homeless. His mom had lost her job, had a heart attack and lost her job. So you know, not just me, but our family reached out and we're still in contact with him. He comes to our house all the time. He spends the night. He goes to church with us still most Sundays. He still has some struggles yet he's making it. So having those good discussions with him about finishing high school and about career choices ...options for him... what does he want to do with his life... and how he can make that change... how can he get out of that cycle... (Teacher became visibly emotional and did not want to continue conversation.)

Mrs. Freidman is a first grade teacher at Brighton Elementary who advocated for a low-achieving student that had been suspended for bringing a knife to school. The student felt bullied and Mrs. Freidman cared enough to address the emotional issues of the child to avoid the student from being unable to continue in the system as a student. The student stayed in school from that crisis in first grade to twelfth grade and plans to go to college.

### A First Grade Girl

I have a story about a girl who I had years ago in first grade who brought a knife to school. She brought a knife to school because some girls were bothering her. I happened to find it and I just looked at her and said, "Oh sweetheart!" Because this is the first time that anything like that had ever happened. She kinda knew and she started crying, balling and all I could do was just hold her. So we took her to the principal and the assistant principal and they had to go through the board. She was suspended from school and they wanted to take her out completely. I fought it! I said, "No! No! We can't do that! That's not in her best interest. Her mother said, "Well, we're going to move!" I said, "No! You're not gonna move. We're going to fix this so she feels comfortable." She shouldn't have done it but she was afraid so let's address that. About a year ago, I was in Kroger and I saw a cashier with a bright, smiley face. I said, "Oh my gosh!" and she said, "You were my teacher! You were my teacher in first grade!" I said, "Yes!" and I didn't tell her or remind her about the knife. But this is this beautiful girl who was working to pay for her things she wants and she's going to college! How successful is that? And she remembered! I remembered her which is amazing! She was a student who just liked to play and did not have any interest in reading and writing. She was a low underachiever

totally but I think the right people were put in her way. Hopefully she had a mentor that worked with her. They need one person and if that's you... I mean that is just awesome!

Mrs. Kendrick is a third grade teacher at Appleton Elementary who had to address a student who was not only a poor reader but also had behavior issues. Mrs. Kendrick took the time to individually tutor her in reading and the student improved enough to be able to read on grade level. Her behavior then improved because her academic frustrations were being resolved. Mrs. Kendrick cared enough to meet the specific needs of a capable but struggling student and supported her through her difficulties.

#### A Third Grade Non-Reader

One of my favorite success stories is a little girl named Heather. She was tagged as a bad student. She couldn't read well. She was a bad student but very bright. When I got her she was just frustrated. She could not read so I just took her back to phonics and helped her learn. She picked up very quickly and by the end of the year she was where she needed to be on her reading level. Her behavior had just turned around dramatically. That's just a sweet story to me because she was just a frustrated student is all and needed a little attention. I was just glad I could help her breathe and say, "Hey this is what's wrong and now can we work together to fix it." We fixed it and I don't know where she is now. But I just see her as a bright student that's achieving above her level now because she's very bright. So to me they always go hand in hand. You can't separate them, personal and academics, on any level. You always want progress, so of course, underachievers. I think would be more effective on whatever level you want. As a learner they just go hand in hand because you got to push them forward in what they're learning to do.

### **Summary of Academic and Emotional Needs of Caring**

Teachers as caring mentors in this study were explored by separating caring in the classroom into two divisions: caring about academics and caring for the emotional needs of students. Two particular types of relationships not related to meeting academic needs of students were highlighted as teachers took on parental roles or helped students in times of difficulty. Universal caring was shown by the teachers to be an essential belief that created the philosophy of caring they practiced in their teaching. When teachers prioritized their caring practices simultaneously with instruction, they also developed mentoring relationships with their students.

### **Summary of Chapter Findings**

This chapter has reported the findings of my study. Each section of the chapter was devoted to one of the four themes that emerged after an analysis of the data from the six teacher participants. The four themes—a broad view of effective teaching, teacher efficacy beliefs, students as unique individuals within social contexts, and teachers as caring mentors—were central views common to the teachers investigated through the survey, interviews, and observations. Each theme section of the chapter was further divided to provide a closer look at related sub-themes. In Chapter Five, I discuss how these findings answered the study research questions, unexpected findings, recommendations, limitations, and future directions of my research.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter concludes the exploration of effective teachers' beliefs and practices as it relates to caring and teaching students. I discuss the implications of the present study's findings in relation to each research question including how consistent the findings are with previous research. I use Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, Noddings' theory of caring, and Gay's theory of culturally responsive teaching to frame my findings. The theories of Vygotsky, Noddings, and Gay include an underlying premise that emphasizes the importance of personal relationships in student learning environments (Vygotsky, 1978; Noddings, 1984; Gay, 2000). Their theories support the view that cognition is interactive with the social environment and this interaction is at the heart of teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Noddings, 1984; Gay, 2000). All three theorists promote the idea that children in schools ideally need social environments such as relationships between students and teachers that support both their academic and personal lives.

The purpose of this final chapter is to discuss the findings of my research and to make recommendations for addressing the challenges faced by teachers. The present study offers insight about teacher practice and research in the area of teacher caring. The chapter begins with a summary of the study, followed by findings, limitations, implications for classroom practice and recommendations for further research.

#### **Summary of Study**

As test-driven approaches of current impersonal reform continue to multiply in school districts across the United States, today's teachers and students need and deserve to feel



personally valued and supported while tackling the academic challenges of required state curricula and assessments. After a decade of NCLB reform (NCLB, 2003), distinguished by a standards-based curriculum with learning assessments based on annual test scores, national progress has been minimal. Sobering statistics show that the achievement gaps continue to exist. Certain groups, such as Black and Hispanic students, are still lagging far behind their White peers in subjects like reading and math (NCES, 2009, 2011) and are considered “at-risk” students. Numerous family conditions in our current society—such as absent or single parents, blended families, incarcerated parents and homelessness compound the problem and expand the “at-risk” conditions to include more students than ever before. For teachers and students alike, it is becoming increasingly important to understand and foster equitable alternatives to current impersonal reform, which fails to improve the achievement of all students especially disaffected underachievers.

Therefore, the first purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers who were making a difference in student achievement especially for underachieving students, and the second purpose to determine the diverse ways in which these caring beliefs and practices may be influenced by cultural or socioeconomic factors. Data collection for the present multi-case study took place at the two Title I elementary schools in central Georgia from December 2013, to March 2014. Three types of data were collected for the present study: a survey, interviews, and observations. Six teachers were selected from a nomination survey given to staff members at both schools for being effective in helping students in their personal and academic lives. These six teacher participants provided data for the interviews and observations. The data was analyzed to explore the beliefs, practices and possible influences on these teachers’ views about what they believe and practice in their classrooms.

Four common themes shared by the teachers were discovered: broad view of effective teaching, teacher efficacy beliefs, students as unique individuals within social contexts, and teachers as caring mentor. The results were carefully analyzed to provide a context for my recommendations that are applicable to the problem.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Findings of the present study suggested that effective teachers have common caring philosophies and practices that they consider to be highly beneficial to improving their students' lives. Within the context of the theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky's social constructivism, Noddings' theory of caring, and Gay's view of culturally responsive teaching, data were gathered, organized, and analyzed around three research questions about effective teacher beliefs, practices, and demographic influences related to caring for students. These questions focused on the link between teachers' caring beliefs and practices and interpersonal relationships as well as cultural and socioeconomic influences and other factors affecting student achievement. Findings for each of the three research questions are presented.

#### **What are effective teachers' beliefs about caring relationships and interactions with their students, especially with underachieving students?**

Regarding teacher beliefs about effectiveness, the teachers of the present study shared a broad view of "effectiveness" that mutually encompassed "technical expertise" to efficiently deliver academic subject matter and "expressive relationships" to personally support students (Prillaman, Eaker, & Kendrick, 1994). The present study gave voice to these effective teachers' unheard "language of the expressiveness" emphasizing the importance of caring relationships in

the classroom. This broad view of teacher effectiveness also led my inquiry to a broad view of student achievement shared by these teachers.

The teachers acknowledged that their caring beliefs and practices supported both the academic and personal achievements of students, especially for difficult to reach students. They viewed student achievement as not merely attaining levels of proficiency on standardized tests but as attaining personal goals of learning that might not be revealed on standardized tests. Furthermore, as caring mentors and parental figures, these teachers believed and demonstrated that they needed to support not only students' intellectual achievement but also their social and moral growth. Moreover, teachers' discussions often emphasized the full human growth of students as a priority over academic achievement. In sum, it was the teachers' willingness to practice caring beliefs about their students as individuals and their potential to grow and learn through relationships that fostered the intellectual, social, and moral growth and achievement of their students.

Relationships are a direct result of caring beliefs and practices of teachers interacting with students. Caring in education is demonstrated by a teacher taking the time to develop relationships with students and helping them pursue academic goals. Noddings defined caring as a natural, affective response between humans and stated that caring in education happens when teachers strive to establish and maintain caring relations providing a foundation for the interactions between teachers and students (Noddings, 1984, 2005). Inherent in all the teachers' beliefs from the present study about relationships was the acceptance of Noddings' definition of what caring should look in schools.

By examining effective teachers' perceptions about being involved in situations with "at-risk" learners, the present data revealed particular teacher beliefs about caring relationships that

are important for helping students achieve. The majority of the findings related to the themes of teacher efficacy beliefs, students as unique individuals within social contexts, and teachers as caring mentors.

Teachers' beliefs about their caring relationships in the classroom included a holistic view that applied to their interactions as a group role model for all students as well as the ability to give full and personal attention to one student at a time if needed. Teachers in the present study believed that all students could learn and achieve success both in school and life. Their beliefs and values led them to feel responsible and qualified to ensure that their students learn. More specifically, the values described by the teachers drive them to believe in their effectiveness while continually searching for ways to meet the needs of the students. Education was valued as a source of empowerment for success in school and later in life and the teachers strived to make this point with their students. Each teacher felt a responsibility to respond and give value to the whole child, which included social and emotional needs instead of just fulfilling academic requirements.

Teachers' statements revealed that they did not base student success solely on grades or test scores. Instead, they stressed that students' hard work and self-improvement with teachers' assistance produced a level of personal success even if it did not show on standardized tests. Consequently, teachers spoke of mixed feelings about reform legislation like NCLB and RT3 because of conflicting views about how and when children achieve success.

The beliefs stated above are the inspiration and motivation for teachers supporting and encouraging individual students through mentoring relationships that maximized their potential and led to greater achievement. Embedded deep within the teachers' beliefs and values that

directed their teaching was the strong emphasis on each child as an individual within their classrooms. The significance of students' unique individuality was viewed as a motive for initiating and fostering caring relationships. Although teachers instructed entire classes, a lot of their concerns centered on certain children, especially underachievers, and much of their time was spent on deciding how to encourage and support individual growth and development. These teachers had the best interest in mind for each individual student in their classrooms even though other teachers often feel pressured by current educational reforms to focus on the entire classroom performance on standardized assessments as the main indicator of quality teaching.

The teachers in the present study embodied the view of how interactive learning activities promoted interpersonal connections that may have profound consequences on students' development and academic success. All the teachers felt that their roles in caring relationships were paramount to being an effective teacher, especially with underachievers. The teachers defined their relationships with their students using words like trust and respect. Frequently, teachers believed they must take on very strong roles in their relationships to help with difficult situations and to step in as a parental role model. One teacher stated, "I would think that a caring relationship has everything to do with being an effective teacher. They have to know that you care about them in order for them to want to work for you."

Previous research on classroom caring found the importance of teacher caring expressed through relationships as the most frequent and relevant description given by teachers (Buese, 2005; Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Cha, 2008; Martin, 2009; Thompson, 2010). Even though caring relationships are demonstrated to varying degrees by other teachers, it was a non-negotiable priority for the teachers in the present study.

**What are effective teachers' practices that demonstrate caring relationships and interactions with their students, especially with underachieving students?**

Vygotsky (1978) recognized the essential importance of social interaction for the development of language, content, and thought. He found that the social experiences of children determine their thought development, which later becomes internalized. Discussions, conversations, or time spent between teachers and students considering each other's perspectives can easily develop a trustworthy relationship. Teachers in the present study reported many approaches to demonstrating their support of caring relationships with underachieving students through effective student-centered teaching practices. Teachers were very resourceful in providing student-centered instructional interactions focusing on student growth and understanding. Creating positive communities where students were actively involved in engaging lessons was important to the participants and seen in classroom observations. Teachers held high expectations but built students' confidence when needed.

Strategies are planned actions and well-selected words that teachers use to help students become successful. Often when teachers see struggling students, they are motivated to plan actions designed to help students achieve their goals. Specific positive student relationship strategies such as sharing personal stories, using humor, and finding the good in students were often used to help students achieve personal and academic goals. Teachers took supportive actions in difficult situations with students but also sought help from others when necessary.

Individual or differentiated instruction has been well documented as a way to customize instruction to better fit the academic needs of a child. All six of the teachers in the present study affirmed the findings that they are more effective as a teacher when instruction is uniquely

tailored to improve each student's achievements. Teachers have found that students come into their classrooms with many different backgrounds, cultures, experiences, or socioeconomic situations. All of these circumstances influence students' ability to learn and progress in school. Even though there is a state mandated curriculum, teachers find it necessary to approach some students differently to reach them.

One recurring theme of effective teaching practices found in prior research literature and my study about effective teachers' practices is the power of high expectations (Bernard, 1998; Martin, 2009). Teachers demonstrated that they believed in the present and future success of their students. Positive expectations about students, especially those "at-risk," are critical for students to develop a positive sense of themselves and to succeed in their academic and personal lives (Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Martin, 2009; Thompson, 2010). Studies documenting teachers who take the time to encourage and be positive with their students align with Noddings' theory (1984), which emphasizes the components of dialogue and confirmation. Noddings (1984) suggests that students rise to the level expected by teachers (confirmation) who care and have an ongoing dialogue and connection with them. In addition to dialogue and confirmation, relationships that include ongoing practice (Noddings, 1984) reinforce the teachers' caring and are directly linked to their ability to exhibit high expectations.

**In what ways may effective teachers' beliefs and practices of caring be influenced by the teachers' cultural backgrounds and/or the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students as indicated by their Title I eligibility?**

According to Gay (2000), the development of a caring relationship between teachers and students that is sensitive to students' cultural backgrounds is an essential part of Culturally

Responsive Teaching (CRT). Meaningful caring communication cannot exist without culture, culture cannot be known without communication, and teaching and learning cannot occur without communication or culture (Gay, 2000). CRT is a way for teachers to show care to culturally diverse students and can be connected to teachers' own cultural backgrounds as well as the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of their students.

Teachers have the capacity to impact the character, development, and behavior of students. Likewise, teachers and students have influences on their own lives that happen outside of school or long before they have come together in a school environment. The teachers in the present study spoke of multiple influences in their teaching including their own personal influences, cultures and backgrounds of students and teachers, and students' socioeconomic status. They admitted that their own backgrounds and cultures sometimes affected the way they were as a person, which spilled over into their personality as a teacher influencing their behaviors and character. Cultural differences of students were recognized for specific instructional purposes but did not necessarily affect how teachers individually treated students. All the teachers worked at Title I schools and recognized the different cultural and economic backgrounds of students in their classrooms.

The diversity of today's classrooms creates daily opportunities for teachers and students to interact in certain ways because of their past and present influences. Earlier research literature found equity and respect to be a prevalent themes that are critical to answering the question of whether teachers' beliefs and practices of caring are influenced by the teachers' cultural backgrounds and/or the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students. Buese (2005) and Thompson (2010) cited the importance of fairness within the classroom management of teachers who must negotiate power and demonstrate equity for all students. Treating each student



with appropriate care corresponds to showing how each student is cared for in an equitable way with the others are in the classroom (Bartley, 2007). Cha (2008) found that caring teachers modeling (Noddings, 1984) fairness to all students regardless of diverse cultural backgrounds was a critical theme for the personal and academic success of students. The findings from the teachers in the present study were consistent with the research citing equity, respect, and fairness for all students as caring ways that were modeled or demonstrated daily in their classrooms. The teachers validated differences about themselves and their students but these dissimilarities were seen only as qualities that made each one of them a unique person. In other words, cultural and socioeconomic factors were not the reasons that influenced teachers' beliefs and practices of caring but rather several aspects that contributed to the make-up of an individual.

Teachers expect their students to respect them and students want to receive respect from their teachers. Noddings' (1984) caring components, with the most emphasis on modeling and practice, defined respect as a way to show positive regard for students' basic human rights as a person. Bongo (2011) found that respect is a necessary behavior for teachers who demonstrate caring behaviors toward students in their classroom. Cha (2008) and Bartley (2007) listed mutual respect as being very important to the cultural caring of minority students. The findings from the present study were consistent with these research findings. The study's sub-theme of humanistic teacher values included the teachers' beliefs about responsibility to the whole child. The teachers endorsed the value of education but expanded their roles beyond content knowledge. They focused their attention on getting to know their students on a personal level and meeting their needs, which initiated a show of respect and worth for them as an individual. Teachers stated that their relationships with their students were based on mutual trust and respect.

One unexpected area of findings from my study was related to demographic influences on teachers and students. Demographic differences, like race or socioeconomic status, of the teachers or the students, only seemed to matter for specific academic purposes but did not play a major role in how the teachers related to the students as individuals. Teachers recognized, responded to and valued demographic differences but at some point, these differences were incorporated into a more inclusive and immediate sense of caring common to all humans regardless of their cultural or economic backgrounds. Relationships based on individual interactions between teachers and students and small group interactions between teachers and their classes appeared to have a more powerful influence than relationships based on general demographic factors such as race and socioeconomic status. The ongoing immediacy and familiarity of relationships based on daily small group and individual interactions seemed to create individual bonds and a sense of classroom community that superseded the distal influences of demographic factors such as race or socioeconomic status.

Furthermore, the teachers in my study did not ignore or minimize differences in their students as in “colorblindness” (Williams, 2011). Colorblindness is a view that attempts to promote racial harmony by overlooking racial differences and pretending they do not matter. Contrary to this view, the teachers in the present study accepted and responded to these differences using culturally responsive teaching. For example, Mrs. Freidman took the time to get to know her students and their families, especially those who have English as a second language, by asking them to bring in something special to share with everyone. She stated that this shows the family that you care about them. Mrs. Barnes made a point to learn how to communicate with her English Learners and to understand about their home life. If needed, she used her ESOL teacher as a resource to help her reach out and partner with parents that do not

speak English. Nevertheless, racial differences were not over-accentuated or given priority. They were not given a disproportionate status over other defining characteristics such as gender, personality traits, learning styles, family background, and talents. Students did not lose their racial identity but in their teachers' minds, they were unique individuals to be respected and cared for as members of an inclusive classroom community. Teachers appeared to be guided by multicultural principles of equitable opportunities for learning and shared values of fairness and equality for all students (Banks et al., 2001). They were aware of making adjustments to their own teaching style within the instructional framework to help students achieve, especially underachievers. Caring for the students as individuals was the primary focus and priority of the teachers desiring successful students. They were able to incorporate diversity while strengthening the unity of their classroom community (Banks et al., 2001).

Consequently, the teachers had a universal caring mindset of encouraging individual student support and high expectations that embraced everyone and took precedence over making blanket accommodations based on general demographic backgrounds. According to Noddings (1984), universal caring is a natural phenomenon that recognizes human encounters and affective responses as a basic fact of human existence. Noddings' definition of universal caring leads to the belief that humans have an inborn need to connect with and relate to others. Caring for others and being cared for gives humans meaning and purpose in life. In the present study, universal caring was notably recognized when teachers were asked about caring for different cultural groups. Several teachers felt that if students identified with a particular cultural group, it did not have any overriding influence on how they related to these students as individuals. For example, Mrs. Burnes stated that the students' cultural backgrounds did not affect how she treated them because they were all people. Even though the teachers were well aware of cultural differences

of students, they treated them with an individualized type of caring that superseded general cultural expressions of caring. They related to each student as a unique human individual not as a generic member of some race or economic class. They cared for each student as their own child regardless of race or economic background.

### **Limitations**

Various limitations exist within the context of the present study. First, the present study was limited to six teacher participants. Due to this small number of teachers, findings cannot be generalized to all teachers. In addition, findings were limited to female elementary school teachers. The findings may have been different with male participants or if the teachers were middle school or secondary teachers. Male participants or teachers of older students may not have similar beliefs and practices. Also, the influences on caring beliefs and practices related to cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds were limited to the backgrounds of the participants and their students in the study. Five of the participants were White and only one was African-American and this lack of diversity may have biased the findings. In addition, observations were limited to one per teacher. Multiple observations may offer a larger quantity of data. Also, the study was limited to two 2011 Title I Distinguished Schools. These schools have also achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) since 2006 under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, and they have a significant population of students who are economically disadvantaged, and therefore findings cannot be generalized to all schools. Finally, teachers' stories were the only source of information data and no objective methods such as grades or standardized test scores were used to validate the beliefs and practices for student outcomes.

## **Implications**

Understanding how effective teachers approach the needs of all students is of vital importance to understanding learning within the context of a classroom and could have critical implications for a wide range of problems faced by many school systems. Caring in the form of teacher attitudes, expectations and behaviors about students' human value, intellectual capability, and performance responsibilities has major implications for students, especially underachieving students.

Beliefs, practices, and influences found throughout the teachers' narratives in the present study were revealed through caring relationships and designed to reduce the obstacles that struggling students face. Understanding how caring relationships, affective teaching, teacher effectiveness, and cultural factors relate to the process of student achievement can be used to assist education stakeholders involved with helping "at-risk" students.

### **Caring in the classroom.**

The findings from the present study provided validation of Noddings' theory of caring and the four components: modeling, practice, dialogue and confirmation. Teachers who acted as caring role models showed students what caring looked like in a school setting. Teachers who created a sense of classroom community allowed students the chance to form relationships while pursuing academic goals. Dialogue was especially important for teachers and students who spent time listening, showing genuine respect, and a mutual commitment to their relationship with each other. Confirmation was shown when students trusted caring teachers to encourage and shape them to work toward their personal best. The effective teachers' stories from the present study were consistent with the ethic of care recognized by Noddings and added further evidence to her theory of care.

The findings also contribute to the debate about whether effective teaching and caring relationships are compatible in the classroom. The teachers found that students today, especially underachieving students, are increasingly in need of caring adults in their lives. Caring relationships were considered to be critical to their beliefs about how to practice effective teaching. The teachers expressed how students are motivated and strive to achieve because they knew the teachers cared about them as a person. Even though it was time consuming to individually develop a relationship with students, teachers felt it was worth the time and effort because students responded positively by showing improvement in all areas of their lives.

Understanding how the universal need for caring is specifically expressed to students with diverse cultural or low-income backgrounds can be very beneficial to teachers and students. The results from the present study show that working with students from low-socioeconomic or diverse backgrounds does require teachers to recognize and adjust to different instructional needs. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a way for teachers to show they care for culturally diverse students. However, the teachers in the present study utilized universal caring to care for students from culturally diverse or low socioeconomic backgrounds. Universal caring recognizes affective responses as a basic way of human life where teachers use caring as a lens for all their beliefs and practices. Caring for all students in the same way through relationships superseded caring that was customized solely because of cultural or socioeconomic differences.

### **Social and emotional learning.**

Today's teachers are completely surrounded by "the language of the technical" that encompasses every reform, standard, and assessment required of teachers in classrooms all over the United States. All these initiatives are based on recommendations by policymakers who are

not working with “at-risk” students and who feel they know what is best for improving student achievement. Yet there are thousands of teachers working in the trenches of classrooms each day with struggling students who do not have an accessible pathway leading to politicians responsible for reform. There are few opportunities for effective teachers to share their experiences with local, state, or federal governing authorities. Teachers that have experienced student successes using “the language of the expressiveness” such as developing relationships and employing social and emotional learning (SEL) have no time or place outside their own peer group to share their accomplishments. The present study gave voice to six teachers to fully and honestly express their stories about what they have seen, felt, heard, believed, and practiced in their experiences with “at-risk” students throughout their careers.

Balancing the cognitive demands of teaching with the affective needs of teachers and students is a real dilemma that must be addressed each day by all teachers. According to the teachers in the present study, the link between intellectual and emotional learning provided ways to increase student achievement for students “at-risk.” The teachers made a strong connection between cognitive and affective domains of learning. They used affective practices to address cognitive content knowledge, which enabled students to integrate their thinking, feeling, and behaving. The process of caring produced emotional connections that allowed the teachers to engage student learning. This type of school culture can be connected to social and emotional learning, which integrates research-validated, learner-centered psychological principles of cognitive, social and emotional learning. Students partner with their teachers to co-create learning experiences. The study participants feel that the benefits of affective teaching are so necessary that they do their best to integrate caring into all aspects of the cognitive demands of teaching.

**Teacher Effectiveness.**

There is a need to broaden the definition of teacher effectiveness according to the teachers who participated in this study. Teacher effectiveness is typically associated with academic student growth and achievement. The teachers in this study revealed that personal growth is a prerequisite to intellectual growth. Therefore, teacher effectiveness must include the successes of personal student growth and academic achievement. The teachers' stories clearly showed that their "at-risk" students who had academic growth had also invariably experienced personal growth before or simultaneously with school improvement. Teachers who attended to the social and emotional needs of students saw increases in confidence and motivation. In the present study, a teacher could not be considered effective without student-centered teaching practices and positive student relationship strategies.

**Educational Equity.**

Addressing educational equity issues is a major area of concern for Georgia's schools as well as numerous schools across the United States. Achievement gaps between students of different races, socioeconomic backgrounds, or other differences like English-language proficiency continue to persist after years of reform. Many of the students that comprise these achievement gap groups are underachieving students at low-performing schools where they have been subjected to teachers or environments focused only on student performance on standardized tests. Consequently, many low-achieving students who are considered "at-risk" have not had the opportunity to experience a caring teacher who establishes a relationship of mutual respect with them like the teachers in this study. Effective teachers with caring beliefs and practices could



level the playing field for underachieving students and give them the same opportunities and access to an education that values personal and academic growth.

Federal Race to the Top (RT3) money was given to states desiring intensive support and effective interventions to help with closing the achievement gap but required a focus on data and assessments to turn around their lowest-performing schools. RT3, like NCLB, provided mandates about annual yearly progress (AYP) or meeting standards but did not provide ideas on how teachers were to go about “turning schools around.” In the present study and other related studies, the teachers had a broad view of effective teaching beliefs and practices that emphasized the importance of caring relationships. Teachers acting as caring mentors responded individually to underachieving students with practices and strategies that helped students grow both as a person and a student. Based on the results from my study, it is entirely conceivable that achievement gaps are unresolved because of the forgotten fact that the cognitive and affective domains go hand-in-hand. Each school from the present study seems to fit into the category of a “high-performing, poverty school” because they are Title I distinguished schools. If results like these two schools could be duplicated, perhaps the “caring gap” would close and along with it the achievement gaps.

### **Recommendations**

Noddings (1991) claims “stories have the power to direct and change our lives” (p.157). The six teachers in this story based all their responses to the interview questions from lived experiences. The voices from their stories represent a stand of solidarity against mandated dehumanization that neglects and discounts teachers’ personal knowledge. Since current impersonal educational reforms aim at reducing achievement gaps for “at-risk” students but do

not include the personal input of effective caring teachers, findings from the present study could be used as an inclusive approach to reform initiatives that incorporates both the expressive and technical knowledge of educators.

**Practicing teachers (especially Title I teachers).**

This section offers educational recommendations on how practicing teachers may become caring, effective teachers with students, especially with underachieving students. The recommendations are:

1. Believe and demonstrate a philosophy of universal caring that is foundational for other types of caring. Demonstrate in daily interactions a fundamental caring for all students regardless of their race or socioeconomic status. Racial and socioeconomic identities and needs are secondary factors compared with the primary human identity shared by all students and their universal need for care. Believe that all humans, even apathetic students who do not seem to care, have an inborn need to connect and relate to others that gives purpose and meaning in life. Understand that universal caring means treating all students with the same fairness, equity, and respect despite cultural or socioeconomic differences. This universal caring encompasses caring for students' basic needs such as food but also their social, emotional, and intellectual needs and puts priority on the best interests of the students.
2. Believe and demonstrate the power of caring relationships in school settings. Initiate, develop, and maintain relationships with students in addition to meeting academic goals. Effective caring teachers believe that supportive relationships are critical for showing students, especially "at-risk" students that they care. These relationships are the

foundation that allows teachers to respond to the whole child and incorporate social-emotional learning. They treat life skills as a necessary part of teaching, and relationships built on trust allows opportunities for teachers to help students during difficult or crisis times. Because of these relationships, they often take on parental roles to help, guide, and protect students from potentially damaging threats that could negatively impact their learning.

3. Believe and demonstrate fun but rigorous lessons with all students actively involved. Effective caring teachers ensure that there is a high level of active student engagement by planning creative lessons that involve student interest, projects, partner work, talk time, movement, and technology. They build a sense of community by using humor and personal stories to provide a safe, risk-free learning environment that makes everyone feel comfortable.

4. Believe, demonstrate, and support high expectations for all students in and outside of school. Caring, effective teachers believe that all students can learn and become successful in school and life. They believe in students' abilities even when students do not believe in themselves. They help students envision what they can accomplish by telling them to look toward future successes. They ask students to set goals, provide exemplary work examples, expect quality work, give them several opportunities to improve, and never allow students to stop trying. They tell students that education can empower them to succeed in school and provide a foundation for further success later in life. High expectations are supported through sincere praise and recognition for even the smallest amounts of improvement, which builds confidence in struggling students.

5. Believe, demonstrate, and value the individual uniqueness of each child in the classroom. Caring, effective teachers do not compare students with peers. They realize that since all children learn differently, a “one size fits all” approach never works. They acknowledge each student as an individual with individual strengths, weaknesses, talents, and characteristics. They do not judge students for being different or making mistakes. They tailor their instruction to meet students’ academic needs.

**Professional development/recruitment for school leaders.**

The review of literature and results of observations and interviews of caring, effective teachers in the present study support the recommendation that professional development for in-service teachers must include examining teacher beliefs, practices, and strategies concerning caring, student individuality, and relationships related to personal and academic achievement. Although academic success is the focus of schools, professional development can provide opportunities to show how caring beliefs and practices can be used effectively to teach curriculum standards and prepare for assessments. Teachers can review the literature or participate in book studies about the connection between the cognitive and affective domains of learning. Teachers can be encouraged to incorporate approaches such as social and emotional learning (SEL) and principals and school administrations can use SEL to make decisions, enact programs, and provide alternative solutions to ensure student success for all curriculum standards and assessments.

Principals and administrators concerned with student success can explore prospective teachers’ experiences and beliefs about student achievement, especially underachieving students. The review of literature as well as the interviews and observations of the six teachers, point to a

broad view of effective teaching and student achievement that incorporates caring and social and emotional learning. Interview questions for candidates may consist of questions related to caring and achievement such as how caring can be used to support learning. Performance histories of a teacher candidate can be expanded to include student achievement that is not exclusively tied to test scores but includes both personal and academic growth. New teachers can be assigned a staff mentor who models a caring relationship with students that can be duplicated by the new teacher.

### **Teacher-preparation programs.**

Interviews and observations with the six caring, effective teachers support the idea that teacher-preparation programs should focus on beliefs and practices that merge caring with achievement. In other words, future teachers in college know that they will be given state curriculum standards for teaching and testing each year. However, teachers are not explicitly taught different ways, including a caring approach, to present and support standards to achieve student success with a diverse set of student needs. Often teachers in preparation programs are told to not smile until after Christmas. College courses should include literature on success stories of “at-risk” students and schools. Practical ways to develop relationships, care, set high expectations, and create engaging classrooms need to be studied and practiced. Education students should be taught how to balance the demands of the technical and expressive aspects of teacher effectiveness.

### **Educational reform.**

Educational reform is an ever-present constant in the lives of teachers who must decide each day how best to meet the needs of their students as well as the demands of legislation pertaining to their jobs. Currently, some school systems in Georgia are taking advantage of RT3

money that provides support for technical expertise for passing scores on annual testing of CCGPS standards. RT3 could be revised to include and value not only technical expertise but also expressive and caring relationships. This could possibly be the missing personal link for impersonal education reform that has historically shown to have a minimal effect on many students (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Lanphar, 2011; Thompson, 2010). The present study supports inclusive and equitable educational reform by acknowledging the personal contributions of effective caring teachers and fostering the achievement of all students especially disaffected underachievers. It is highly feasible that teachers who are effective in turning around the lives of “at-risk” students hold the key to making a huge impact on other students who are struggling in schools. There has yet to be a reform that recognizes the importance of caring relationships to support achievement. RT3 funds could be used in various ways to operationalize caring such as creating “teachers as mentors” programs, travel money for teachers to visit “high-performing, high poverty” schools with effective caring teachers, and training on SEL or other related professional development. If RT3 and future reforms neglect the importance of caring relationships for students, especially underachievers, they will only be partially successful at best and at worst will frustrate teachers and students with failure.

### **Educational researchers.**

The present study gave voice to the neglected voices of six effective teachers and their caring beliefs and practices in two central Georgia Title I schools but much more research is needed. Topics related to teacher caring and how it supports achievement are paramount to the future direction of the lives of many students. Caring is much harder to define than most technical aspects of teaching. More data from actual case studies documenting what teachers actually say and do would be helpful in providing more insight into the complexity of caring

relationships. In addition, using different population samples and participants such as male teachers in middle schools and racially diverse teachers at different educational levels would add to the knowledge of caring beliefs and practices of all types of effective teachers. Since medical technology advances at a very quick rate, it is important to have current studies linking the neuroscience of affective experiences to instructional achievement. Lastly, since the present study shows success of underachievers who respond well to social and emotional learning, more studies are needed documenting this connection. It could be beneficial to know how many “at-risk” academic students are also “at-risk” social or emotional students. Studying students who struggle in several areas could provide further awareness of how best to approach student achievement.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Every child is special in their own way with a unique set of personal talents and challenges. Even though every child is unique, they all share a universal need to care and be cared for. Caring relationships give children the personal support to develop their unique talents and to face the challenges of school and life. It is my hope that teachers will continue to seek ways to use the personal power of their own caring beliefs and practices to effectively help students, especially underachieving students, turn their lives around and improve their achievement in school and life.

My study contributes to the field of research by addressing the often-neglected areas of affective teaching and learning. It also provides answers to the question of how learning and achievement are affectively supported within the classrooms of effective teachers. Furthermore, the present study sounds a clarion call for more inclusive and equitable educational reform that

acknowledges the personal contributions of effective caring teachers and fosters the achievement of all students especially, disaffected underachievers.



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## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

First, I would like to congratulate you on being nominated by your peers as an effective teacher and thank you for agreeing to be a participant in my study. I will ask you a few basic questions then move to specific ones about your caring beliefs and practices.

1. How many years have you taught school?
2. At what school are you presently teaching? How many years?
3. What grade do you teach?
4. What subject(s) do you teach?

### **Beliefs**

5. What do you think makes you an effective teacher with students, especially underachieving students?
6. In your view, what role does having a caring relationship with students play in being an effective teacher, especially with underachieving students? How so?
7. How would you define a caring teacher-student relationship?
8. Why (or why not) is it important for you to be a caring teacher with students, especially underachieving students?
9. In your view, what needs (if any) do students—especially underachieving students—have for a caring teacher?
10. In your view, how is being a caring teacher related to student achievement?
11. In what ways do you consider yourself to be a caring teacher concerning achievement?

12. Do you think your students perceive you as a caring teacher concerning achievement?  
If so, how?
13. Do you believe that all students can learn? If so, how might a caring teacher support student learning?
14. What do you think makes a successful student? How might a caring teacher contribute to student success?
15. Do you believe that all students can be successful in life? If so, how might a caring teacher contribute to their success in life?
16. How do you know when you have done a good job of developing caring relationships in the classroom?
17. In your view, how do reform initiatives like NCLB or RT3 and state standards relate to creating positive relationships with students? More specifically, how do these initiatives help or not help you to create caring relationships with your students?

### **Practices**

18. What do you think caring teachers should do to show they care for students?
19. What do you think students believe that teachers should do to show they care for students?
20. What do you do to show that you care for your students, especially underachieving students
21. What are some examples of how you build caring relationships with your students, especially underachieving students?
22. How do you personally connect with students that are difficult to reach?

23. How do you help your students deal with difficulties they may face now or in the future? What do you say or do to help them deal with these difficulties?
24. When working with students who struggle more in school, in what ways do you change your approach in the relationship?
25. In what ways, if any, do you show that you care for your students by holding high expectations of their achievement? What might be an example of how you believed in students' capabilities when they doubted themselves?
26. In what ways, if any, do you show that you care for your students by allowing active student involvement and participation in your classroom?

**Beliefs/Practices/Influences**

27. In what ways might your own cultural background or your students' cultures affect your interactions with students?
28. Do you think it is important to be sensitive and responsive to the diverse backgrounds of your students such as African American, Hispanic, or Title I students? How so or not so?
29. In what way, if any, do you attempt to be sensitive and responsive to the diverse backgrounds of your students such as African American, Hispanic, or Title I students?
30. In what ways, if any, is your teaching or relationship with students influenced by their diverse cultural backgrounds such as African American, Hispanic, or Title I students?
31. Do you think you are more or less effective as a teacher when you differentiate (or customize) instruction to meet the diverse cultural needs of your students? Why so?



32. In what ways, if any, do you differentiate (or customize) instruction to meet the diverse cultural needs of your students? How so?
33. How would you describe caring for African American, Hispanic, or other cultural groups of students that you teach?
34. How do you get to know the backgrounds of the students in your classroom? In what way, if any, does this help you to relate to and better care for your diverse students?
35. Do you try to learn about the language or customs of different cultural groups of students? If so, describe how this impacts your teaching and relationships with students.
36. If students identify with a particular cultural group, does it have any particular influence on how you relate to or teach them?
37. How do you understand the world of students with diverse ethnic backgrounds? In what ways (if any) does this understanding influence how you related to and teach them?
38. How do you understand the world of students with low, middle, or high socioeconomic backgrounds?
39. In what ways, if any, may students coming from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds have different needs for support from the teacher? If so, how do you respond to these different needs?
40. I would like to close with one more question. Tell me about your success stories of how you have helped underachievers to reach personal and academic goals.

Is there anything else I should know? Thank you again for participating in this interview.

Appendix C

Observation Protocol

Characteristic/Action	Tally	Description
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• _____</li>   <li>• _____</li>   <li>• _____</li> </ul>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• _____</li>   <li>• _____</li> </ul>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• _____</li> </ul>		

## Appendix D

## IRB Approval

Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs		
<b>Institutional Review Board (IRB)</b>		
Phone: 912-478-0843		Veazey Hall 2021
Fax: 912-478-0719	IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu	P.O. Box 8005 Statesboro, GA 30460

**To:** Barbara McCollum  
Dr. Dan Rea

**CC:** Charles E. Patterson  
Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Initial Approval Date:** 11/7/13

**Expiration Date:** 10/31/14

**Subject:** Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research –  
**Expedited Process**

After a review of your proposed research project numbered **H14164** and titled **“Caring Beliefs and Practices of Effective Teachers.”** it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable. You are authorized to enroll up to a maximum of 8 subjects.

*Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research. – The purpose of this study is to identify the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers and to determine the diverse ways in which these beliefs and practices may be influenced by cultural or socioeconomic factors.*

If at the end of this approval period there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period. Total project approval on this application may not exceed 36 months. If additional time is required, a new application may be submitted for continuing work. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,



Eleanor Haynes  
Compliance Officer



DR. JAMES R. HINES, JR., SUPERINTENDENT

**BOARD MEMBERS**

FRED WILSON, VICE CHAIRMAN  
HELEN HUGHES  
DAVE McMAHAN

DR. MARIANNE MELNICK, CHAIRMAN

SKIP DAWKINS  
JIM MADDOX  
DR. RICK UNRUH

DATE: May 31, 2013

TO: Barbara McCollum  
[REDACTED] Elementary School

FROM: Sharon Moore  
Director of Professional Learning

SUBJECT: **RESEARCH APPROVAL REQUEST**

Your request to conduct research for your graduate program at Georgia Southern University is approved. The title of your research project is, "*The Caring Beliefs and Practices of Effective Teachers*". The purpose of this study is to examine how learning and achievement happens within the classrooms of effective teachers and investigate the caring beliefs and practices of effective teachers. Teacher interviews and observation will be the methods of data collection utilized at [REDACTED] Elementary and [REDACTED] Elementary for the study. The timeframe for this research study is one year from the date of system approval.

Thank you for submitting your IRB form, research proposal, consent form, survey questions, and the principal approval letters.

Please keep in mind that you will be responsible for compiling the data for your research. The staff at [REDACTED] Elementary School, [REDACTED] Elementary School, and the Department of Testing and Information Technology is unable to compile data for your research. Board policy also prohibits the use of system email for personal research. Please also remember teacher and student anonymity is of utmost priority for this research project.

I have attached to this memorandum the Houston County Schools Requirements for Conducting Research.

I wish you the best as you work toward earning your graduate degree. Please let me know if I may be of any assistance to you again in the future.

cc: Mark Scott

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