A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS WHO FORM

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS IN TITLE I MIDDLE SCHOOLS

IN THE SOUTHEAST

by

Natasha Brown

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools. The theory guiding this study was Nel Nodding's ethic of care as it relates to the teacher as a caregiver interested in the expressed needs of the students. Using a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design, 15 southeastern Title I middle school teachers were selected to participate in the study. The central question guiding this research was: How do teachers describe their experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools? Sub-questions to further refine the central question were: (a) What perceptions do teachers have about the factors that contribute to building and maintaining positive relationships with at-risk students? (b) How does modeling an ethic of care impact teachers' relationships with at-risk students? (c) When modeling of an ethic of care, what do teachers perceive as the specific behaviors that help create a sense of security or belonging for at-risk students? Data collection included face to face interviews, a questionnaire, photo narratives, and a focus group. Data analysis used the Moustakas (1994) method for transcendental phenomenological research. This included the epoche, listing significant statements, writing a textural description, structural description, and composite description.

Keywords: at-risk, caring, experiences, positive relationships

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my loved ones who have encouraged and supported me throughout this dissertation journey. This was a journey that I did walk alone because each of you were there along the way. To my mother and father, you have always supported me and encouraged me to be great! Because of you, the "sky's the limit" has always been my motto, I am grateful to have you in my life, I love you!

A special dedication to my husband, Wezzley and children, Kiyan and K'niya. Wezzley, you have been patient, thoughtful, supportive, and selfless, throughout this process. I am grateful for you and I appreciate your encouragement and commitment to riding this out with me. You did not allow me to give up on my goals and you have truly been my rock! Kiyan and K'niya, you have both been an inspiration for me to complete my goals. I pray that you both go further, achieve higher, and be the change that you wish to see in the world. I am grateful that each of you have been understanding throughout this journey and have allowed me to grow and achieve my goals, while trying to balance being mom and wife. I love you all and look forward to the next chapter of our lives!

Acknowledgments

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phillipians 4:13). I would like to first acknowledge God who is the head of my life. My faith in Him has truly allowed me to suffice all the trials that came along with this dissertation journey. I am grateful that His strength is what brought me to the end of this process; I know that He did not bring me this far to leave me. For His grace is sufficient, and I am humbled and honored to have accomplished this goal.

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I would like to acknowledge my family, both natural and spiritual. Your prayers and encouragement have been instrumental to the completion of this journey. I appreciate each of you and I am grateful to have such a loving and supportive family. You consistently reminded me that "I was made for this." I would also like to acknowledge my work family who have cheered me along the way and who have been willing to help whenever needed.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge all of my participants for their time and commitment to serve on this study. Without you, this research would not be possible!

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List of Abbreviations

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Caring Assessment Scale (CAS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study describes the experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools in a southeastern school district. Chapter One provides a comprehensive background and includes situation to self, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the significance of the study, and the research questions. The research questions for this study are backed by research, and they are the driving force of the research study. The chapter concludes with a list of definitions that are critical to understanding the nature of the study and a chapter summary.

Background

The types of relationships teachers build and maintain with students may contribute to the students' overall school experience. Students genuinely want to feel accepted by their teachers and feel a sense of belonging in the school setting which creates positive relationships (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Hanna, 2014). When there is a barrier in creating these positive relationships, students often become disengaged from their education and at-risk for dropout. Aside from being detached or disengaged from their education, students may feel fear of failure and have a desire to protect their social and personal identity (Hanna, 2014). A lack of motivation in school can be a problem where either the student, the teacher, or both give up on learning in the classroom and the student embarks on a cycle of disengagement, falling further behind peers each school year (Hanna, 2014). This cycle of falling further and further behind with no support leads students to become dropouts, and it especially harms students who may already be identified as at-risk (Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, & Marcotte, 2014).

Historical Context

      From as early as preschool or kindergarten, relationships with teachers form a foundation in which children can successfully adapt to the social and academic environment (Myers & Pianta, 2008). A major problem in schools has been that they have trouble promoting caring, and caring relationships are the basis for moral and individualized education (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Noddings, 1992). Over the last two decades, dropout rates have been attributed to individual factors such as race, gender, and academic achievement or institutional risk factors such as poverty and family dynamics, however, a missing element is the school's role in promoting engagement or disengagement amongst students' education (Rodriguez, 2010). Based on previous research, student disengagement can often be attributed to a lack of interpersonal relationships from within the school building (Downey, 2008; Ellerbrock, Kiefer, & Alley, 2014; & Lessard et al., 2014). The connections that students make within their school environment are imperative because "the relationships between teachers and students determine the overall classroom climate, a climate that is becoming increasingly complex" (Newberry, 2010, p. 1702). Understanding the differences in how teachers approach and interact with different students in the classroom is important for students whose behavior is challenging and difficult for teachers to manage (Newberry, 2010).

      When a child has a supportive relationship with a teacher, there is an increase in the child's sense of engagement to the school setting, which helps to increase the child's connectedness to the next teacher (Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Lloyd, 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). A child's mental representations formed with early caregivers subsequently direct the interaction with other relational partners (Buyse, Verschueren, & Doumen, 2011; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Thus, at-risk children who experience teachers with caregiver characteristics, such as sensitivity,

are able to form more quality student-teacher relationships (Buyse et al., 2011). Children's security with parents at an early age is related to children's security with teachers; parent-child relationships is an important resource for children's relational functioning in school (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Social Context

Because schools are social institutions, they are charged with preparing students for the world, which includes being able to communicate and form relationships with others. To do this, schools are responsible for creating environments that help students learn to collaborate and get along with others. Students need a classroom environment where they feel accepted and respected no matter what (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Hanna, 2014). A major part of keeping students engaged in schools falls on the relationships that students are able to build with the adults in a school building. A positive relationship with a teacher can be a developmental asset for children and the quality of such a relationship has an impact on student success at every level (Alderman & Green, 2011; Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

The kind and quality of relationships that students and teachers form with each other are among the most fundamental factors in successful teaching and learning (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schultz; Gelbach et al., 2012; Newberry, 2010). Students who are able to form positive relationships with teachers often experience academic and social success (Knoell, Harshbarger, Kracl, & Crow, 2015; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Skipper & Douglas, 2015). When students do not experience acceptance from teachers or others in the school setting, they may become disengaged from their learning and at-risk to be a dropout. Dropping out of school becomes the end of a process of school disengagement that normally begins early in a student's educational career (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). Students who were high

achievers in elementary school but gradually lost interest in the school environment, describe school as becoming unchallenging and uninteresting (Zabloski & Milacci, 2012).

Theoretical Context

Teachers who build supportive student-teacher relationships are characterized as establishing caring connections with students (Ellerbrock, Kiefer, & Alley, 2014; Kim & Schallert, 2011). Caring student-teacher relationships and supportive interactions also contribute to positive outcomes for students during the middle school years (Anderson, Nelson, Richardson, Webb & Young, 2011; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). In the ethic of care theory, interpersonal relationships are identified as a foundation for moral action where loving and supportive environments promote positive behaviors (Trout, 2012). Within the theory, teachers are identified as having a responsibility to care for students and a responsibility to teach them to care (Noddings, 2002; Trout, 2012). Noddings (2002) identified the following four components of moral education in the care perspective: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. These components help teachers demonstrate to students how relationships should be built with others. "Teachers model caring for students, engage in open dialogue with students to learn about their lives and aspirations, provide opportunities for student to practice caring, and confirm students' goals for ethical growth" (Trout, 2012, p. 26). When teachers follow through with demonstrating care to students, what should follow is a nurturing and positive relationship.

Research conducted on student-teacher relationships reveals the importance these relationships have on student success and sense of belonging (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Kim & Schallert, 2011; Skipper & Douglas, 2015). Much of the research, however, does not specifically focus on the teachers who are able to develop these positive relationships with students. A healthy learning environment creates healthy relationships and within these

relationships between the teacher and the student is where learning begins to thrive (Knoell et al., 2015; Ozgan, 2016). This study used a transcendental phenomenological approach to thoroughly investigate how teachers who have been successful with forming positive relationships with at-risk students describe their school experiences with these students, while focusing on the role a nature of care plays in forming these relationships.

Situation to Self

Based on my personal experiences in school, and my role as a classroom teacher, and school administrator, I believe forming positive relationships with students is important. As an educator, I have always served in Title I middle schools. I feel that these students are often overlooked because they come from a low-socioeconomic background. As a classroom teacher, I experienced academic and behavior successes with students who were considered at-risk for failing. As I reflect on my time with these students, I believe that the positive relationships I was able to form are what led to the classroom successes with these students.

As an administrator in Title I middle schools, I continue to experience success in building positive relationships with students. However, it is frustrating to see teachers who are unable to form positive relationships with students who may be considered at-risk. Even after coaching and providing strategies for these teachers to aid in forming positive relationships, it does not always work. It is this frustration as well as my own positive experiences that will be the driving force behind this research. My motivation for this research stems from my desire to understand the role that a nature of caring plays in helping teachers form positive relationships with at-risk students. It is important to hear the voices of teachers who have experience in forming positive relationships with at-risk students to further understand how best to meet the needs of these students.

I brought ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions to this study. Within my ontological assumption, I recognized that I had to embrace multiple realities. As a researcher, I recognized that each individual in the study would view their experience in a different reality, I understood that I would report multiple realities through different perspectives as themes developed in my findings (Creswell, 2013). My epistemological assumption was grounded in my belief that the knowledge is in the participants, therefore, I had to get close with participants to gain knowledge from their experiences. To eliminate my own biases in this view, I had to work closely with the participants of the study. To gain firsthand information on the participants' experiences, I collaborated and spent time with them to gain their individual views (Creswell, 2013). My personal values about forming relationships with students were tied to my axiological assumptions. I had to position myself in this study by acknowledging my values as I shared the participants' interpretations of their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

I was aware that I needed to listen to the voices of the teachers I was interviewing in order to fully understand their experience with this phenomenon. Because this research looked at how teachers describe their experiences of forming relationships with at-risk students, my research paradigm was social constructivism because it allowed me to look for complexity in the multiple views of the participants (Creswell, 2013). The inductive thinking that surrounded this paradigm helped me better understand the multiple realities experienced by the individuals who are described in the study.

Problem Statement

Several studies have been conducted that sustain the importance of student-teacher relationships in the school setting. These studies reveal the importance of experiences of success to help develop and maintain a positive relationship between children and their teacher (Kim &

Schallert, 2011; Knoell et al., 2015; McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2013; Skipper &

Douglas, 2015). Students need to feel a sense of trust with the teacher to view their relationship

as a caring relationship (Garza, Alejandro, Blythe, & Fite, 2014; Kim & Schallert, 2015; Knoell

et al., 2015).

> The caring relationship built between the teacher and each student seemed to guide their
>
> understanding and constructions of themselves. When students could perceive the
>
> teacher's caring for them, they developed an image of themselves that was confirmed by
>
> the teacher, becoming more confident in themselves. (Kim & Schallert, 2011, p. 1066)

However, students who did not perceive the teacher as caring struggled to see themselves as

good and encountered more negative interactions with the teacher (Kim & Schallert, 2011).

McHugh et al. (2013) conducted a study where students described teacher processes that

fostered or hindered positive relationships. In the study, teacher processes that fostered positive

relationships were referred to as bridges, and teacher processes that hindered relationships were

referred to as barriers (McHugh et al., 2013). In addition to the significance of forming these

relationships, student-teacher relationships were found to be more important in children who

were academically at-risk, specifically children with low socioeconomic backgrounds and

learning difficulties (Fisher, Reynolds, & Sheehan, 2016; Murray & Zvoch, 2011; Roorda et al.,

2011). Teachers working with at-risk students attribute their success to communication between

the students and their families and having a genuine concern for these students (Updegraffe,

2011). Based on current research, it is evident that student-teacher relationships are important,

but a critical examination of the specific interactions of students and teachers in these

"supportive relationships" is needed (McHugh et al., 2013). The problem is that the voices of

teachers who have experienced positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools has gone unheard.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools in a southeastern school district. In this research, positive relationships were generally defined as teachers' demonstration of caring in their daily practices (Noddings, 2010) which had fostered a connection between the teacher and the student. The theory guiding this study was ethics of care (Noddings, 2012a) as it related to the teacher as a caregiver interested in the expressed needs of the students, which in this phenomenon was a focus on building and maintaining positive relationships.

Significance of the Study

This phenomenological research study has empirical, theoretical, and practical significance to students, teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals in the K-12 school system. This study will help improve teaching practices in an often overlooked area of the importance of forming positive relationships with students. In taking a deeper look at student-teacher relationships, school administrators may gain a better understanding of how to help teachers who struggle to form a positive relationship with students. Additionally, following research, paraprofessionals may have a greater understanding of their role in forming positive relationships with students as they assist teachers in the classroom. In this study, educators will gain a better understanding of the role an ethic of caring plays in forming relationships with students.

Empirically, this study will add to the literature by providing a detailed description of how a nature of care helps teachers to form positive relationships with students which gives insight to the "supportive relationships" (McHugh et al., 2013) teachers form to connect with at-risk students. Student-teacher relationships are often reported as a contributing factor to student dropouts (Lessard et al., 2014; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). Studies have revealed that the school relationships students have with peers and adults may influence the student's decision to drop out (Hanna, 2014; Zabloski, 2010). Positive relationships have been found to support students forming connections and feeling a sense of belonging in school (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Ellerbock et al., 2014; Kim & Schallert, 2011). There is a need to investigate positive student-teacher relationships as a means of keeping students connected to education, which may in turn decrease student dropout or disconnect with school.

Theoretically, this study brings further understanding of the theory of caring as it relates to the student-teacher relationship. In Nodding's focus on moral education, she noted that it is the teacher's responsibility to care for students and to teach students how to care (Trout, 2012). Building a relation of care provides teacher support that helps students find an honest path to educational fulfillment (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Noddings, 2012a). When teachers show that they care, they often abort their own needs to focus on the expressed needs of the children they serve (Noddings, 2012a). This study extends on Nel Nodding's ethic of care theory by showing how a nature of care influences teachers' ability to form positive relationships with at-risk students.

Practically, this study may help educators gain a better understanding of what is needed to connect with at-risk students. It is necessary to translate the slogan "relationships matter" in order to guide educators to professional development of a research-based theory of the specific

interactions of student-teacher relationships (McHugh et al., 2013, p. 11). Educators must

understand the behaviors necessary to connect with students. When teachers care about their

students, they are welcoming, they show respect to their students, and they listen and take time to

understand students' needs (Jeffrey, Auger, Pepperell, 2013). The information gained from this

study may inform professional development for educators on how to form connections with

students, especially at-risk students. Teachers should understand that there is a diverse manner

in which they must interact with at-risk students in the classroom (Tobin, 2008). The interactions

and connections that teachers form with at-risk students, provides insight on reducing student

dropout rates for those students who choose to leave school because they lack meaningful

relationships with teachers.

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Research Questions

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This research focused on the experiences of teachers who had been successful in forming

positive relationships with at-risk students. Data was collected from the teachers who had

experienced the phenomena of building positive relationships using the following central

question, which is a broad question restating the purpose of the study, and three sub-questions,

which further specify the central question (Creswell, 2013).

Central Question

How do teachers describe their experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk

students in Title I middle schools? Teacher-student relationships were found to be more

important for children coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds and considered

academically at-risk (Murray & Zvoch, 2011; Roorda et al., 2011). Gifted dropouts reference

their relationship with teachers more often than the teachers' curriculum because they yearn for

deep, meaningful relationships with teachers (Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). The goal of this

central question was to understand the overall experiences of teachers who form positive

relationships with students considered to be at risk.

Sub-question One

What perceptions do teachers have about the factors that contribute to building and

maintaining positive relationships with at-risk students? Because teacher-student relationships

create positive outcomes for students, teachers must have the necessary skills and use proven

techniques to foster these relationships (Anderson et al., 2011; Kiefer et al., 2014). To have

success with difficult students, teachers should be flexible and have the ability to shift their

responses to the emotional needs of their students (Warshof & Rappaport, 2013). This question

focused on understanding the factors that teachers perceive as helping them build positive

relationships with the at-risk students whom they serve.

Sub-question Two

How does modeling an ethic of care impact teachers' relationships with at-risk students?

When teachers create caring connections that respond to students' academic and social needs a

sense of belonging for the student occurs (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Ellerbrock et al., 2014).

Reciprocity between the student and the teacher is essential for care to truly exist, the student

must reciprocate the caring by acting in a manner that demonstrates an understanding that the

teacher does really care (Trout, 2012). This focused on understanding how a caring relationship

impacts teachers' connections with at-risk students.

Sub-question Three

When modeling an ethic of care, what do teachers perceive as the specific behaviors that

help create a sense of security or belonging for at-risk students? A component of caring teaching

is that both students and teachers have responsibilities as learners; teachers consider students'

needs when taking any course of action because caring teaching helps teachers learn about their students, while helping them be successful (Trout, 2012). This focused on understanding how teachers create an environment where students feel welcomed and understand that teachers care about their needs.

Definitions

1. *At-Risk* – The use of school record data characterizing students based on course failures, poor attendance, low achievement on test scores, and school suspensions (Henry et al., 2012).

2. *Caring* – A relationship where one person acts as the one who cares and the other person is the individual being cared-for (Noddings, 2002, 2010).

3. *Experiences* – Teacher-student involvement in the classroom as well as counseling on the run and casual interactions beyond the classroom setting (Merrow, 2011).

4. *Positive Relationships* – Teachers demonstration of caring in their daily practices (Noddings, 2010).

5. *Title I-* schools that receive federal funding to provide additional academic support to help low-achieving children meet state academic standards because they have been identified as having high percentages of children from low-income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Summary

The first chapter provided an introduction to the proposed research study. Background information is provided that sets the tone for the basis of the study. The problem examined in this research addresses the need to give voice to the teachers who have experiences in forming positive relationships with at-risk students. This transcendental phenomenological research study describes the experiences of these teachers. The researcher's motivation for conducting this study including philosophical assumptions and paradigm was discussed. This chapter also introduced definitions of terms that drive the study, research questions, and the overall significance of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter of the research study provides a theoretical framework and an overview of relevant literature surrounding an ethic of care and how it contributes to forming positive student-teacher relationships. The overarching theoretical framework is Nodding's ethic of care theory (Noddings, 1984, 1992). This theory centers around the construct that within care ethics a relationship is developed in which one individual takes on the role of the one caring and the other is the cared for (Noddings, 1984, 1992, 2002, 2010). Since this research looks at how teachers' ethic of care aides in forming positive student-teacher relationships, this theoretical framework is appropriate. The relevant literature looks at caring and connecting, caring behaviors, caring student-teacher relationships, a caring and nurturing environment, and caring for at-risk students. The literature further discusses the importance of providing an ethic of care to students to form positive student-teacher relationships. The relevant literature examines the role of an ethic of care plays in helping teachers build these relationships with students and how these relationships lead students to success. The caring behaviors that teachers demonstrate to establish relationships with students are examined to determine the significance of student outcomes and sense of belonging in school. Student sense of belonging and ability to establish positive relationships with teachers are considered a big part of experiencing a sense of care in school. This review of relevant literature helps to gain a better understanding of an ethic of care and how it relates to creating positive student-teacher relationships.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Nodding's (1984) ethic of care. Noddings (1984) stated, "As human beings, we want to care and to be cared for and caring is

important in itself" (p. 7). Caring in its many definitions could be described as a state of mental suffering or engrossment where one has anxiety or fear about something or someone, or caring could be described as being charged with protection or maintenance of something or someone (Noddings, 1984). A caring relationship is a connection between two people, the one who cares and a recipient of care or cared for (Noddings, 1992). "Caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviors" (Noddings, 1992, p. 17). For the purposes of this research, caring will be described as teachers being in relation or connecting with students.

Characteristics of Caring

Noddings (1984) described the characteristics of caring as an act of engrossment or attention and motivational displacement. Within engrossment, the one who cares has an interest in the cared-for and chooses to empty themselves of their own interests in order to receive the interests of another (Kim & Schallert, 2011; Noddings, 1984, 1992, 2002). Engrossment occurs when the one caring is receptive to the cared-for and listens and understands what the cared-for is expressing. It is the process in which the one caring brackets self-interests and interpretations of what the one being cared-for wants or needs and becomes open to the needs and interests of the one being cared-for (Nelson, 2013). The feeling that the one caring experiences when they are engrossed in the cared-for, wanting to respond and give help to the cared-for was motivational displacement. Motivational displacement allows the one caring to make the needs of the cared-for a priority, wherein the energy of the one caring is temporarily placed into the needs or projects of the cared-for (Kim & Schallert, 2011; Noddings, 1984, 1992, 2012b). The one caring's main focus is to preserve and enhance caring both in themselves and within those they encounter (Noddings, 1984).

After describing natural care, Noddings (1984) described an ethic of care. An ethic of caring requires two feelings: a sentiment of natural caring-where a person acts on behalf of another because he or she wants to, such as a mother taking care of a child, and the second feeling comes from a person's memory of moments of caring and being cared for, which gives the individual a feeling of obligation to serve someone else rather than his or her own interests (Nelson, 2013; Noddings, 1984, 2002). In a caring relationship, the one who cares sets aside his or her own values and tries to understand the needs of the cared-for (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Noddings, 2010, 2012). Natural care is caring that does not require an ethical effort (Trout, 2012). Natural care involves the vulnerability, openness, and receptivity of another's needs without evaluation or assessment (Noddings, 1984; Sinha & Thornburg, 2012). Ethical care takes place when individuals attempt to care for others that they either do not know or that they do not feel a natural likeness towards (Noddings, 1984; Trout, 2012). "Ethical caring requires an effort that is not needed in natural caring" (Noddings, 1984, p. 80). An ethic of care encompasses a universal desire to be cared for and to be in a positive relationship with another human being (Noddings, 2002).

Ethic of Care

An ethic of care is grounded in the "I ought" which arises in our lived experiences (Noddings, 1995, p.187). "Ethical caring's greatest contribution is to guide action long enough for natural caring to be restored and for people once again to interact with mutual and spontaneous regard" (Noddings, 1995, p. 187). An ethic of care puts emphasis on the role of the cared-for, insisting that caring does not reside entirely in the attitude and actions of the one who cares (Noddings, 1995). In an ethic of care, the one who cares and the one being cared-for have

a mutual responsibility of caring, in effect, caring becomes a mutual exchange where the cared-for accepts the effort of the one caring to offer care (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Noddings, 1995).

Noddings (2012b) contends that care ethics is a relational ethic wherein the major concern is a caring relationship which includes brief encounters to long-term associations. The responsibility to maintain these relationships falls on both the one caring and the one being cared-for. The one caring is attentive, listening, and responding positively to the one being cared-for. The one being cared-for responds in a way that shows the caring has been received. This response is much like when an infant smiles because of his mother's caress or when a student pursues a topic after a teacher's encouragement. The one being cared-for must respond to the one caring in order to signify that there is indeed a caring relationship. The response can be a building block for a continuous caring relationship because it gives insight on the needs and interests of the one being cared-for and gives the one caring a greater perspective on how to deepen the caring relationship (Noddings, 2012b).

Caring should not be looked as a behavior, but rather as a relation, which causes the one caring to commit to actions on the cared-fors' behalf (Noddings, 1984). A caring encounter requires reciprocity or the act of the cared-for to accept and acknowledge the actions of the one caring, even when a caring action or attitude is not returned (Noddings, 1984; Trout, 2012). Caring requires a relationship and a commitment between people, which could be called interdependence (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). Noddings (1992) stated, "We should educate all our children not only for competence but also for caring. Our aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving, and loveable people" (p. xiv).

Components of Moral Education

Noddings (1984, 1992) identified four components of moral education from an ethic of care perspective: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Modeling allows teachers to nurture students and teach them how to care and respond to caring. Dialogue allows teachers and students to become familiar with each other and helps maintain caring relations. Practice allows for opportunities to demonstrate caring and confirmation allows individuals to be embraced as ones devoted to caring (Noddings, 1984, 1992; Valesquez, West, Graham & Osguthorpe, 2013). In order to confirm, educators must receive students and be in constant communication through dialogue because the one caring has to have an understanding of the one being cared-for that lets them know what the cared-fors are trying to accomplish (Noddings, 1984, 2002). Continuity is an essential element in teaching students to be cared for (Noddings, 2002). This is especially important in students who are at-risk and often lack consistency in their lives. Consistency is important because "today, when so many children lack continuity in their family lives and when conditions in the larger society exacerbate the need for continuity, schools must give greater attention to this requirement" (Noddings, 2002, p. 26).

The proposed study will examine how teachers have provided an ethic of care to at-risk students in Title I middle schools. In order to fully understand the essence of positive student-teacher relationships, we must take a closer look at how teachers have been able to demonstrate an ethic of caring for their students. To move from a natural state of caring to an ethic of caring, teachers need to have an obligation to put students' needs before their own. An ethic of care relies on educators to abandon their judgments in order to promote the growth and development of students as people (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). In this theory, students' personal growth and development become more important than other school factors such as curriculum. Teachers

take on the role of the one who cares, while children take on the role of the cared-for, each understanding their mutual responsibility to meet the needs of the other. The teacher, who is the one caring, should show engrossment or attention to the students, who is the cared-for, by using motivational displacement as a means of listening, seeing, and feeling what the student is truly expressing (Noddings, 1992, 1995). "From the perspective of care ethics, the teacher carer is interested in the expressed needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study" (Noddings, 2012a, p. 772).

Related Literature

The related literature describes how teachers use caring to form connections with students. Students desire a teacher's attention and authentic presence in the classroom (Miller, 2000). Teachers should demonstrate caring behaviors in the classroom and form connections with all students. A soulful teacher brings caring to the classroom and relates the subject to the needs and interests of the students (Miller, 2000). When teachers are able to demonstrate caring and meet the needs of students by being relational, students may feel a sense of belonging to the classroom and the teacher that helps to create a positive relationship (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Hanna, 2014).

The literature reveals some key elements that are essential to understanding the importance of caring and building and maintaining positive student-teacher relationships. Teachers form caring connections when they are able to build supportive student-teacher relationships (Ellerbock et al., 2014; Kim & Schallert, 2011). These relationships are characterized by how the teacher interacts with students in the classroom. Teachers must maintain good communication and engage in consistent dialogue with students in order to understand how to successfully meet the needs of the students under their care (Noddings,

2012a). When teachers are able to meet students' needs, they move closer towards building a

positive relationship with students.

Caring and Connecting

Noddings (1992) suggested that educators take public responsibility to raise caring,

healthy, competent, and happy children because schools cannot achieve academic goals without

providing caring for students. "Caring teaching implies that both students and teachers have

responsibilities as learners" (Trout, 2012, p. 7), and this teaching helps teachers and students

form connections. Teachers think about their students' abilities, needs, and aspirations when

they care; teachers also take time to learn about their students while challenging them to succeed

academically. When teachers make relationship building a priority, they are demonstrating a

caring pedagogy that helps students feel connected to the school and the teacher (Trout, 2012).

Through this, teachers demonstrate to students, that caring is what is most important to them in

forming relationships. The best teachers care deeply about the individual needs of students

(Merrow, 2011).

A caring relationship is a connection between two people, the one who cares and a

recipient of care or cared for, wherein; both parties are responsible for contributing to the

relationship (Noddings, 1992). Keifer et al. (2014) found that knowing the students, caring for

the students, and connecting with the students helped teachers to meet students' developmental

needs, form positive relationships, and maximize student academic motivation. Responsive

teaching happens when student-teacher relationships are grounded in care and connectedness

(Kim & Schallert, 2011; Kiefer et al., 2014; Noddings, 1992; Roorda et al., 2011). Kim and

Schallert (2011) found that students needed to feel a sense of trust in order to view their

relationship with the teacher as a caring relationship. Students guided their understanding of

themselves through the caring relationships they built with teachers; students who perceived the teacher as caring were more confident in themselves, and students who perceived the teacher as not caring, had trouble seeing themselves as good (Kim & Schallert, 2011). As teachers develop caring relationships with students, students begin to show their own confidence in caring as related to the teachers' responsibility in demonstrating an ethic of care in schools.

Students have a responsibility to respond to teachers' efforts to care, although, this should happen in a natural way, if teachers' behavior is unfamiliar to students, they may have trouble recognizing the teachers' attempt to care (Noddings, 1992). Often times, children make sense of what caring behaviors look like based on what they have experienced at home. Students may have difficulty recognizing care if teachers behave in a manner that students have already perceived as not caring. Students and teachers have a need for each other, wherein, students need adults that care about them and teachers need students to respond to their caring (Noddings, 1992). This mutual respect for giving and responding to care helps fulfill the needs of interdependence between the student and the teacher.

Noddings (1992) suggested that teachers show their students how to care by creating caring relationships with them. These caring relationships are important because "our society needs to care for its children…to produce people who can care competently for their own families and contribute effectively to their communities" (Noddings, 2002). When students feel alienated from their schoolwork and the adults who try to teach them, they perceive teachers as not caring (Noddings, 1992). For students, perceiving teachers as not caring can easily cause them to disconnect with the teacher and the school. This disconnect is often what eventually leads students to become at-risk for dropout (Hanna, 2014). Despite this, the reality is that teachers really do care; however, they have trouble making the necessary connections that

constitute a caring relationship with their students (Noddings, 1992). Lack of making this connection can leave children feeling like there are no adults who care for them in a school setting. Connectedness and belonging are a big part of students finding a sense of caring in schools (Kim & Schallert, 2011; Kiefer et al., 2014).

Caring Behaviors

Caring behaviors are demonstrated within several encounters of interactional relationships between teachers and students and these relationships make a significant difference for students who are at risk for academic failure (Downey, 2008; Collier, 2006). When teachers consistently show and demonstrate caring behaviors, students are able to grow and develop academically and socially. Teachers who demonstrate caring traits into the academic curriculum will promote the growth of caring, competent students (Noddings, 1992). Students may be able to see a model of this behavior, and not just rely on teachers who say, "I care." It is not enough for teachers to just tell students that they care but, "caring teachers listen and respond differently to their students" (Noddings, 1992, p. 19). Caring teachers recognize that each student is different and they respond to their students according to their needs. Caring teachers listen to students, give compliments, and are welcoming. In addition, they respect student input, and take time to understand student needs (Jeffrey et al., 2013). Caring teachers foster a sense of belonging in the classroom, get to know students personally, support students' academic success, and attend to students' physiological needs (Garza et al., 2014). These behaviors are a vital part of students perceiving teachers as people who care.

Communicating. An important part of forming student-teacher relationships comes from the consistent interactions between the student and the teacher. Student to teacher interactions are the daily back-and-forth social and instructional exchanges that teachers and students have

with one another throughout the day (Hamre, Pianta, Burchinal, Field, Locasale-Crouch, Downer, Howes, LaParo, & Scott-Little, 2012). These moment-to-moment interactions that occur between teacher and student are the building blocks for their relationship (Claessens, van Tartwijk, van der Want, Pennings, Verloop, den Brok, & Wubbels, 2017). To develop significant relationships with students, teachers should interact with students to get to know them both academically and socially, because interaction provides a channel for the teacher to understand student motivations and a means for teachers to show respect for students and their worlds (Edwards & Edick, 2013). In getting to know students, these daily interactions often come in the form of constant communication and consistent feedback. Teachers should be able to respond to the behaviors of students both as individuals and as members of the classroom (Edwards & Edick, 2013).

Skipper and Douglas (2015) conducted a study on teacher feedback, another caring behavior for teachers. The study revealed that following experiences of success with a teacher, children reported a more positive student-teacher relationship, illustrating how important experiences of academic success can be to the student-teacher relationship. However, students who received teacher criticism felt negativity towards the student-teacher relationship (Skipper & Douglas, 2015). The manner in which teachers respond to and give feedback to students plays an important role in students' perceptions of the teacher as someone who cares. Teachers' demonstration of caring behaviors can determine how students feel about themselves and the teacher. Teachers can create a learning environment in the classroom that helps to motivate students (Hanna, 2014). The learning environment can contribute to students perceiving the teacher as caring or not caring.

As the one who cares, teachers must have the caring behavior of listening. This is an important skill when it comes to communicating with students. Teachers should be attentive and watchful of student needs. Even when a teacher hears that a student dislikes school or an academic subject, as the one who cares, the teacher must respond to the expressed needs of the cared-for, therefore, the demands of the school must be set aside, while the teacher attends to the concerns of the student (Noddings, 2012a). To do this, teachers need time to build a relation of care and trust, and they must also engage in dialogue to gain a better understanding of how best to meet the needs of the student or cared-for (Noddings, 2012a). Tough (2016) suggested that when dealing with students who perceive school as a threatening place, teachers have an opportunity to disarm those threats by changing the way they communicate. A form of communication that is perceived as showing care includes verbally communicating high expectations with students, expressing positive statements to encourage student effort, monitoring and assisting students during learning activities, and individualizing learning outcomes (Garza et al., 2014). Communicating in this manner helps to create a more positive environment and promotes student academic success. The communication that teachers provide for students, especially, those who are at-risk must come from a position of trust and care.

Meeting physical and emotional needs. Accommodating students' needs is a critical part of forming student-teacher relationships. As teachers begin to develop significant relationships, they must meet students' needs and create learning situations that take student achievement to the next level (Edwards & Edick, 2013). Teachers often respond to students' needs by supplying the necessary resources to help students be successful. When teachers supply these necessary resources, it demonstrates a way to help students feel wanted and nurtured in a safe climate (Garza et al., 2014). To value students as individuals, teachers must

see the differences and accept the multiple realities of students. Teachers should teach from the perspective that each student is unique, which allows the teacher to capitalize on the knowledge, skills, and beliefs that each student brings to the classroom, therefore, creating an enriched classroom environment that accommodates individual differences (Edwards & Edick, 2013).

In a study conducted by Jeffrey et al. (2013), students identified that in student-teacher caring relationships, teachers meet their physical needs, foster their emotional well-being, and provide strategic assistance. Meeting their physical needs meant teachers kept them safe and met their basic needs such as feeding them. Fostering emotional well-being meant teachers were comforting in appearance and environment, formed connections on a personal level with students, and made students feel valued with personal recognition. Providing strategic assistance meant teachers provided academic assistance and helped students with personal issues such as dealing with the death of a family member (Jeffrey et al., 2013).

Forming meaningful connections. Caring behaviors have been recognized as fostering a sense of belonging, forming connections by getting to know students personally, supporting academic success, and attending to physiological needs (Garza, Ovando, & Seymour, 2010; Garza et al., 2014; Knoell et al., 2015). When students begin to feel like they belong to a classroom environment, they also begin to form meaningful connections with teachers. Forming meaningful connections is a teacher caring behavior that supports student-teacher relationships. In a study by McHugh et al. (2013) students described their relationships with teachers as bridges, wherein teachers formed connections with students, or barriers, wherein teachers were inattentive or failed to form connections with students. Students' experiences and interactions with their teachers' demonstrated behaviors gives students the opportunity to make generalizations about student-teacher relationships.

To strengthen meaningful connections, teachers can influence engagement with their students by recognizing and appreciating their strengths and life experiences (Conner, 2013). When teachers are open to learning more about students' experiences, students begin to feel more connected to the teacher and the classroom. It is the teacher's responsibility to encourage students to trust adults and help students identify a sense of belonging to the classroom community (Blimes, 2012; Conner, 2013). When students begin to trust adults and feel connected to the teacher and the classroom environment, the relationship between the student and the teacher becomes stronger. Edwards and Edick (2013) suggested that for meaningful relationships to occur, the students must see the classroom as a community where there is a need to care about each other and be able to acknowledge that the members are all in a struggle together.

Oftentimes, teachers who are unable to form relationships with students face difficulties in their classroom. These teachers have consistent classroom management issues and are unable to deliver content successfully. When students feel that they can trust their teachers, they have a level of respect for the teachers. The success of teachers and educators comes from their ability to build effective relationships with students (Sterrett, 2012). Students often want to contribute to helping their teachers be successful when they have formed meaningful relationships.

Caring in Student-Teacher Relationships

Trout (2012) expressed the need for teachers to focus on building positive relationships with students:

Teachers can become agents of change through the trusting relationships they build with students. When teachers open their ears, hearts, and minds and assume a willingness to

receive students, according to care theory, they strive for the best in themselves and their

students. (p. 7)

Teachers' ability to develop positive student-teacher relationships shows that teachers

demonstrate caring in their teaching practices and in their classroom environment.

Demonstrating caring in their daily practices is important because "a healthy learning

environment can only be realized with the existence of healthy relationships" (Ozgan, 2016, p.

152). Teachers are to create caring relationships with students, and they have a responsibility to

help their students develop a capacity of care (Noddings, 1992).

Since teachers have the responsibility to help their students develop an ethic of care

themselves, teachers must be careful to maintain themselves as nurturers in the relationship.

Noddings (1992) addressed the power held by the teacher in a student-teacher relationship. A

relationship between the student and teacher is considered an unequal relationship. In a student-

teacher relationship, one person occupies the position of the one caring more of the time and the

other is the cared for, therefore, one person will always be receiving while the other is giving.

This can have the potential to be a barrier if both parties do not recognize that they have a mutual

responsibility in the relationship. To promote a caring relationship, the cared-for needs to

acknowledge that they are being cared for (Garza et al., 2010; Noddings, 1984). Within an ethic

of care, both parties have a mutual responsibility to meet the needs of the other (Noddings, 1992,

1995).

The relationship that develops between a teacher and a student is similar to that of a child

and a parent. Students are usually not as close to teachers as they are to parents, but it is still a

close relationship and some students may feel that teachers are more important than parents

(Noddings, 1992). Part of a study conducted by Buyse et al. (2011) looked at whether close

teacher-student relationships buffered children who were less securely attached to their mothers against negative outcomes, such as aggressive behavior in school. The study concluded that teacher-student closeness decreases the risk of aggressive behavior in less securely attached children with that particular teacher. The committed affective relationship between the teacher and the student affected how the child was able to adjust behaviors in school. Although the attachment relationship with a child's mother has an impact on student outcomes in school, the specific behaviors of the teacher in their relational partnership with the student was an important factor in adjusting student behaviors (Buyse et al., 2011).

The teacher as the one who cares often relies on the response of the student as the cared-for (Noddings, 2010). Because teachers look for students to respond to efforts of care, teachers must take the time to get to know the students they serve. Getting to know students is essential to supporting motivation and engagement in the learning process (Kiefer et al., 2014). This interaction strengthens the relationship of care between the teacher and the student as well as the learning that takes place in the classroom. Learning flourishes when teachers and students are able to build relationships because a teacher's investment in the student affects learning and behavior outcomes (Knoell et al., 2015).

A study by Frelin and Grannas (2010) looked at how student-teacher relationships play out within educational situations, more specifically, how is a relationship agreement between teacher and student created and maintained, and what conditions helped the relationships to emerge or prevented them from emerging. The study found that teachers take on the responsibility to create relationships with their students based on more than just a subject matter interest. Student-teacher relationships serve as a bridge to student learning, however, the student or the teacher always has the possibility to accept or reject the other's invitation to interact

(Frelin & Grannas, 2010; McHugh et al., 2013). The possibilities that take place within education are dependent on the context of social relations that occur in the learning environment (Frelin & Grannas, 2010).

Veldman, van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, and Wubbels (2013) studied the development of student-teacher relationships and teachers' job satisfaction throughout the careers of veteran teachers who retained job satisfaction. In the study, teachers reported that good relationships with students were important throughout their careers. When teachers perceived their relationships with students as less than good, they also perceived less job satisfaction. Data also revealed that in periods of high job satisfaction, teachers showed a high score on relationships with students (Veldman et al., 2013).

Claessens et al. (2017) conducted a study that looked at student-teacher relationships both in and out of the classroom. The study revealed that the context in which teachers built positive relationships mostly took place outside of class, such as in the hallways, field trips, or coincidental meetings that happened because they lived in the same areas. While these students were in class, conversations with teachers were mostly about subject matter and coursework. However, conversations that occurred outside of class were more diverse because students expressed their needs, discussed their behaviors, and shared their interests. Teachers revealed that when they experienced positive relationships with students, the students engaged in more support and collaboration during class. Teachers also revealed that their own behavior during class with these students was more supportive in that they challenged students, asked them about their progress, gave students feedback and treated students as equals. Teachers described their behavior during out of class context with these students as equal to their in-class behavior. They were warm to students and showed understanding and supportive behavior. They greeted

students, gave them compliments, and were willing to help students if needed. In positive

relationships, teachers mentioned that if there was a confrontation about behavior, both the

teacher and student worked on pulling the relationship back to more friendly interactions

(Claessens et al., 2017).

In contrast to positive relationships, the study found that in problematic student-teacher

relationships, student-teacher interactions occurred mostly in class (Claessens et al. 2017). The

interactions between the teacher and student mostly involved the teacher telling the student what

to do, telling the student to pay attention or leave the classroom, and the teacher discussing with

students about their disturbing behavior. Meeting with these students were normally by

appointment and involved concerns about student misbehavior. Teachers described their own

behavior in problematic student-teacher relationships as objective or confronting and mostly

involving trying to get students to behave correctly (Claessens et al., 2017). This study shows

how outside interactions are a way of building positive relationships with students that often

impact interactions inside the classroom. Teachers have to put forth effort into creating positive

student-teacher relationships, especially when there is a disconnection between the teacher and

student. When teachers are able to build these positive relationships, students gain motivation

for learning (Claessens et al. 2017).

Rudasill and Rimm-Kaufman (2009) contend that relationships are very important

resources for young children and children's relationships with teachers to determine social and

academic success. Positive student-teacher relationships provide a foundation for children to

build competence. These relationships also help children to develop effective social skills that

help them get through challenges. Oftentimes when children display behaviors such as

aggression or withdrawal, they have negative relationships with teachers (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009).

It is important for teachers and others involved in education, whether they are teachers, school administrators, teacher educators or researchers, to bear in mind the detrimental effect poor relationships among people in schools can have on children and adults (Trout, 2012). No matter how well teachers know the content, if they are unable to develop and manage the social relationships that make up classrooms, they will not be successful (Noddings, 1992, 2012; Trout, 2012). Poor student-teacher relationships were associated with poorer work habits and higher levels of discipline problems in middle school (Jeffrey et al., 2013). Teachers who are able to form supportive and responsive student-teacher relationships are characterized as being able to establish caring connections with students (Ellerbock et al., 2014). Poor student-teacher relationships often contribute to a disconnection or disengagement that students experience in school that leads to more at-risk behaviors or dropout (Hanna, 2014; Henry et al., 2012). Disengagement of students can also be attributed to the lack of a caring, interpersonal relationship within the school building (Downey, 2008; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; & Lessard et al., 2014).

Positive relationships between teachers and students should be an essential part of classroom instruction. A strong and positive relationship between teachers and students contributes to more effective instruction, whereas, a negative relationship can weaken even the most effective instructional strategies (Marzano, 2011). Although teachers should focus on creating positive relationships, they must realize that even negative relationships constitute an interaction with the students. The most powerful message that a teacher sends out comes from how the teacher interacts with the student. Students often gain their perception of student-

teacher relationships based off what a teacher does (Marzano, 2011). These perceptions may be positive or negative depending on the actions of the teacher.

As children progress from the early years of school to the later years, relationships with teachers can become more distant. It is possible that student-teacher relationships may become more distant as children progress forward because it is in the early years that children face challenges such as learning to regulate emotions, forming relationships with teachers and peers and working independently (Maldonado-Carreno & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). However, student-teacher relationships should be just as important as children move into early adolescence. It is during these years that children's need for relatedness increases and as they transition to middle school caring relationships with teachers are an important factor as children navigate through adolescence (Anderson et al., 2011; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Maldonao-Carreno and Votruba-Drzal (2011) found in their study that the quality of student-teacher relationships was associated with improvements in students' academic skills and reductions in behavior problems throughout elementary school. Additionally, they found that the quality and importance of student-teacher relationships as children developed over the years was unchanging. Thus, the importance of student-teacher relationships is important for children at all levels of schooling.

Caring relationships amongst students and teachers are important throughout a student's school career. However, in middle school, due to the transition, these relationships can be particularly important. Caring student-teacher relationships and supportive interactions contribute to positive outcomes for students during the middle school years (Anderson et al., 2011; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Moreover, as students transition from middle to high school, relationships with adults are considered as one of the most important predictors of success (Myers & Pianta, 2008). Students, specifically students at-risk, benefit both academically and

socially from a caring relationship with teachers (Downey, 2008; Garza et al., 2010; Kim &

Schallert, 2011; Noddings, 1984, 1992, 1995).

A critical aspect of forming relationships is knowing that "building positive student

relationships does not need to occur outside of everyday instructional practices" (McHugh et al.,

2013, p. 34). As teachers go about their daily activities, there should always be some evidence

of caring taking place. Teachers need to be consistent in their display of caring because

"teacher-carers demonstrate caring in everything they do. Every lapse of caring in their own

practice represents a potential failure in moral education" (Noddings, 2010, p. 394). To maintain

caring relationships with students, teachers must continually provide a nurturing environment for

students. Caring relationships between teachers and students is a key aspect of the learning

environment (Collier, 2006).

Caring and Nurturing Environment

Teachers should provide a nurturing and caring environment for the children they serve.

A nurturing environment is an environment that provides nourishment for growth and expression

of ideas. This type of environment also fosters the values of caring, respect, and self-worth

(Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1992). Caring and nurturing classroom environments create a sense

of support for students who are at-risk academically and face difficult life circumstances.

Downey (2008) noted that students who are at risk for academic failure have more success when

they are in a classroom with a teacher that has clear behavioral expectations, creates a caring

classroom community, and provides opportunities for meaningful student participation.

With the changes that occur in today's classrooms, children often face insecurities and

stress which can make the adjustment in a diverse classroom difficult; therefore teachers must

create a caring and nurturing environment for students (Garza et al., 2014). The classroom

should be a place where students experience safety and a sense of belonging. When teachers create a caring and nurturing environment, students gain a sense of connectedness and belonging (Kim & Schallert, 2011; Kiefer et al., 2014). The classroom environment that a teacher creates is important because it helps to lay a foundation for a positive student-teacher relationship. These positive relationships stem from an environment that is overall healthy because it is a nurturing and caring environment, where the teacher and student have a mutual understanding of care for one another. "A healthy environment can only be realized with the existence of healthy relationships" (Ozgan, 2016, p. 152).

The classroom is one of the most powerful settings for influencing youth because students' interactions with teachers can produce or inhibit developmental change and provide social and relational supports for students (Pianta & Hamre, 2009). When children have frequent positive interactions with their teachers, they feel supported and are more open to communicating. A positive classroom environment helps students feel a sense of safety and a sense of belonging. Teacher behaviors that foster a sense of belonging often involve showing a sense of family unity, respect for students, making students feel valued as a member of the classroom, and emotionally supporting students in the school environment (Garza et al., 2014). Garza et al. (2014) noted that teachers fostered a sense of belonging by promoting the classroom as a family, providing positive nonverbal communication, refraining from non-threatening verbal communication, conveying a positive disposition toward students, and using proximity to support students. Overall, a positive classroom environment helps teachers be more effective in connecting with students and building healthy relationships.

Forming positive student-teacher relationships makes teachers more effective in the classroom. Quality instruction along with positive student-teacher relationships is an important

part of student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Frelin, 2015). Effective teachers always find ways to connect with their students, and when teachers put forth the effort to build positive relationships with their students, students improve cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally (Conner, 2013; Sterrett, 2012). Additionally, the quality of the student-teacher relationship benefits the student's well-being, self-confidence, motivation and academic outcomes (Backman, Alerby, Bergmark, Gardelli, Hertting, Kostenius & Ohrling, 2012; Frelin, 2015; Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010). When students begin to feel more confident and motivated for learning, they are less likely to be at-risk for academic failure.

In the study by Backman et al. (2012), students described interaction with teachers, liberty of choice in schoolwork, atmosphere for discussion and school subject success as important experiences in creating a positive learning environment in the classroom. Students explained that being noticed by their teachers and getting feedback from teachers was important. Students found the school environment to be pleasurable when they had the opportunity for choice in their learning in when they were given responsibility for their own studies and learning process. Students valued teachers who created an open classroom atmosphere and gave students the opportunity to take on leadership roles. Students also valued teachers who created positive experiences of learning and working within everyday school subjects (Backman et al., 2012).

Caring for At-Risk Students

Middle and high school students are becoming increasingly disconnected from the adults around them (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). This disconnection or disengagement from adults could be linked to a decrease in positive relationships between teachers and students. Students do not always find support or care in schools; they often experience alienation, failure, and disaffection from school because of the lack of connections with caring adults from within

the school (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). Often these feelings lead students to be at risk for dropping out of school.

When students face difficult interactions with peers or teachers, they may have trouble attaching to the group, be less engaged than other students, and have a greater likelihood of not completing school (Reio, Marcus, & Sanders-Reio, 2009). Zabloski and Milacci (2012) found that most gifted dropouts have few positive relationships with peers, adults, or teachers. The study concluded that teachers have a powerful influence on students' lives and that students wanted meaningful and more frequent relationships with teachers. Interactions between teachers and students and teacher beliefs that drive those interactions are at the root of student-teacher relationships. Of particular importance, is the manner in which teachers interact with learners at-risk; teachers must seek practical ways to address the diverse needs of these at-risk students in the classroom (Tobin, 2008). When students feel connected to the teacher and a sense of belonging to the school, they are less likely to engage in negative behaviors that put them at risk for failure (Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010). Once students form a connection, school becomes important, and the students want to be successful.

Considering at-risk students. There are a variety of factors that contribute to the academic hardship of students who struggle in school (Kutcy & Schulz, 2006). Students' socioeconomic background and family dynamics can create a barrier for students and cause them to be unfocused academically (Murray & Zvoch, 2011). When children fall two or three years behind their peers, it becomes hard for them to catch up academically, and they drop out of school in the ninth or tenth grade. In addition, socially promoted students become at-risk when they fall behind their grade-appropriate classmates and their work ethic becomes diminished (Kutcy & Schulz, 2006). Students who experience academic frustration can also have disruptive

behaviors, which lead to increased discipline issues and can leave students at-risk for academic failure (Jeffrey et al., 2013).

Rudasill, Niehaus, Buhs, and White (2013) suggested that children who experience positive peer interactions enjoy school and engage in more adaptive school behaviors than children who experience negative interactions with peers. Children, who have difficulty building positive relationships with peers, may also struggle to build positive relationships with teachers. Often, these children who struggle to have successful relationships with teachers in early grades miss out on opportunities to learn positive social strategies that enable them to interact with other adults and peers. Lacking the social skills to interact with adults and peers can put students at-risk because they do not have a sense of belonging in school due to barriers in forming relationships with teachers and peers.

According to Myers and Pianta (2008), children who display disruptive behaviors early in their school career sometimes set a trend of a continuous pattern of disruption and low achievement as they go throughout school. When children display disruptive behaviors, it can be a major challenge for classroom teachers. However, children who display significant behavior problems in school are still able to develop positive relationships with teachers and other adults in the school setting. Student-teacher relationships help to improve the social and learning environments in school because these relationships are considered an intervention in helping troubled students be successful (Myers & Pianta, 2008)

Children who experience conflicts with teachers may also experience increased conflict with peers and difficulty adjusting to the social norms of school. A public display of the conflict with an important classroom relationship such as the teacher-student relationship may create an environment where the student also has difficulty engaging positively with peers (Rudasill et al.,

2013; Troop-Gordon & Kopp, 2011). On the other hand, a close relationship with the teacher may increase peer acceptance and contribute to children's social adjustment and success with peers. Overall, the nature of the student-teacher relationship can have a direct effect on the student's behavioral orientations and peer relationships (Troop-Gordon & Kopp, 2011).

Students who are considered at-risk due to low socioeconomic background, exhibiting negative behaviors in school, or receiving special needs services are less likely to form positive relationships with teachers. Rudasill et al. (2010) examined the role of student-teacher relationship quality on students in grades 4, 5, and 6 on the relations between students' background characteristics, students' temperament, and students' risky behavior. The study found that students' background characteristics such as low socioeconomic status, gender, and receipt of special services as well as students' difficult temperament were associated with engaging in risky behavior and conflict in their relationships with teachers. Students with higher socioeconomic status and no special services were more likely to have closer relationships with teachers. The study concluded that students who feel connected to teachers have a sense of belonging that causes them to be less likely to engage in negative behaviors as a means of escape (Rudasill et al., 2010). Building positive student-teacher relationships becomes a safe haven for these students while in school.

Challenges to educate at-risk students. Educating students who struggle academically can be a challenge for educators. Teachers may be challenged to demonstrate caring behaviors responsive to students' needs, especially, when teacher experiences and perceptions sometimes obstruct caring for students whose backgrounds are ethnically and culturally unique (Garza et al., 2014). A major part of the challenge for educators comes as they try to build a rapport with students who deal with obstacles that cause them to perform poorly academically and have

behavior issues. Educators often have to modify curriculum and instructional practices to accommodate students who have learning and behavior challenges (Tobin, 2008). Teachers must modify instructional practices to establish a learning environment that meets the individual needs of students. When teachers modify the content, the process, and the product of student learning, it helps students feel more comfortable in the learning environment. When teachers provide a variety of learning methods for students, learners who are reluctant or struggling often become engaged in the learning process (Tobin, 2008).

Learning challenges and external issues that are not properly addressed can cause frustration for both teachers and students (Yessel, Margison, Cross, & Merbler, 2005). These challenges come from children who struggle academically, have behavior or attendance issues or sometimes have a low socioeconomic background. Children with these struggles can have a disregard towards school because they are focused on other things. When students show a lack of care for their work, and there is a lack of parental response to teachers' concerns about students' attitude and disengagement in the classroom, it causes a level of frustration for teachers (Kutcy & Schulz, 2006).

Teacher relationships with at-risk students. Students who are at risk of failing school based on behavior and academics, as well as students who have difficulty learning, are those most in need of having positive student-teacher relationships. Student-teacher relationships are especially important for the learning process and outcomes of students who are at risk of school failure, including ethnic minority students, students with low socioeconomic statuses, and students with learning difficulties (Roorda et al., 2011). These students sometimes lack the skills to form positive relationships and are therefore at a greater risk of becoming school dropouts. Positive student-teacher relationships can be a resource for students at risk of failure, and even

students who have severe behavior problems in school can benefit from developing positive

relationships with teachers (Myers & Pianta, 2008). Relationships with teachers or other caring

adults can be the glue that keeps these students connected to the school environment.

Supportive relationships between a student and a teacher contribute to positive outcomes

for students at risk for academic failure or school dropout (Anderson et al., 2011). Students need

to form positive connections with teachers or other adults in order to have more success in

school. Continuous teacher support could counteract risk factors in at-risk students, which leads

to positive effects on a child's development (Spilt, Hughes, Kwok, & Wu, 2012). When caring

teachers model an ethic of care to students, it can attribute to maximizing the positive effects on

students' growth and development.

Creating early relationships with adults plays a significant role in a child's development

(Maldonado-Carreno & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). In student-teacher relationships, a caring and

supportive teacher can have a similar impact in shaping a child's outcome as that of a mother

(Mason, Hajovsky, McCune, & Turek, 2017; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Since children spend a

large portion of their day in school, teachers are an important source of support and emotional

security when students encounter academic and social challenges. The teacher often acts as a

socializing agent who teaches children self-regulation and problem-solving skills (Huges et al.,

2008; Troop-Gordon & Kopp, 2011). Maldonado-Carreno and Votruba-Drzal (2011) stated that

good relationships with teachers include high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict.

Closeness refers to the warmth, positivity, and open communication between the teacher and

student. Conflict refers to the negativity and lack of rapport between teacher and student

(Maldonado-Carreno & Votruba-Drzal, 2011; Mason et al., 2017). Close student-teacher

relationships promote more positive outcomes, while student-teacher relationships with more

conflict put students at a greater risk of school failure (Myers & Pianta, 2008). Teachers, who invest in displaying a level of caring to create a positive student-teacher relationship with at-risk students, help to decrease the level of conflict between the teacher and student and increase the level of closeness.

Noddings (2005) described how teachers take on different roles in the classroom in an effort to build relationships with at-risk students. Some teachers are able to teach the curriculum to students that other teachers may find impossible to teach. These teachers are able to abandon the curriculum and focus on relationships. The roles of these teachers are often that of a social worker or even a parent, however, they are able to take on the roles in their classroom that allow them to fulfill the needs of their students. Teachers have the task of helping students learn to be recipients of care, as students who do not learn this are not only academically at risk; failure to respond to caring attempts also hinders the growth and development of students (Noddings, 1992). Teacher-student relationships are more important for high-risk students and the effects of a positive teacher-student relationships are stronger for at-risk and ethnic minority children (Fisher, Reynolds, & Sheehan, 2016; Liew, Chen, & Hughes, 2010; Murray & Zvoch, 2011).

To reduce at-risk factors, it is important for teachers to model caring behaviors for these students. The caring behaviors that teachers demonstrate contribute to helping teachers form connections and positive relationships with students. Trust is one of the major caring behaviors that teachers need to demonstrate with students. Frelin (2015) contends that when students have learned to mistrust adults, teachers have to employ strategies that help to negotiate students' trust. Teachers can show these strategies by being humane and by displaying care for the students. As students begin to trust teachers in a caring student-teacher relationship, a bridge is formed that enables troubled or struggling students to be helped (Frelin, 2015). Another caring

behavior that teachers must demonstrate is being able to make content relevant to students. Caring teachers are able to relate subject matter to the needs and interests of students (Miller, 2000). When students are able to relate to the subject matter and connect with teachers, they have a greater chance of reducing at-risk factors.

Children's ability to adjust to the school environment provides implications for children's long-term behavioral adjustment, social engagement and academic success in school; therefore, the development of student-teacher relationships is an important predictor of children's long-term adjustment in school (Eisenhower, Baker, & Blacher, 2007). As children begin to form connections with teachers, they develop a sense of belonging that helps them have a better outlook at being socially and academically successful. Teachers must understand that the environment they create for students is a large part of how well students become adjusted to the school environment. Butler (2016) suggested that teachers be cognizant of students' emotional needs by creating safe, caring, respectful environments where students can reach their full academic potential. As teachers create a safe, nurturing environment, they foster much needed teacher-student relationships, especially for students who have trouble adjusting to the school environment.

Students who are considered at-risk often perform low academically or create substantial behavior problems as a defense mechanism to not having a significant connection to school. For students whose backgrounds have led them to experience fight or flight reactions all the time, developing a sense of belonging and connection in school may require more intense intervention (Tough, 2016, p. 86). Students such as this often need teachers who are willing to go the extra mile in order to form meaningful relationships. Tough (2016) suggested that in addition to forming meaningful relationships and feeling a sense of belonging, at-risk students truly feel

motivated about school when they perceive that they are doing important work that is challenging and rigorous. Teachers should take the time to ensure that these students are not only forming meaningful relationships, but that they are also able to connect to the learning taking place in the classroom.

"Time spent on building a relation of care and trust is not time wasted. The students will have the teacher's support in finding an honest, if divergent, path to educational fulfillment" (Noddings, 2012a, pp. 774-775). Students are more likely to have a better feeling about school when they know that they have the support of teachers and they have been able to build a relationship of trust and care. As teachers connect with students, they help students build a sense of self, because they take time to listen to students and draw out their thinking (Merrow, 2011). Learning about themselves, helps students not only become models of care themselves, but they are able to benefit from the knowledge and skills they gain from the teacher. Teachers who model caring behaviors teach at-risk students how to navigate through school and how to use the knowledge and skills they learn to produce life-long benefits (Collier, 2006).

Summary

Identifying teachers' caring behaviors is an important factor in promoting an environment that maximizes student learning and helps develop positive student-teacher relationships. Demonstrating an ethic of care should be important to all educators as they attempt to create a learning environment for children that motivates them to be successful both academically and behaviorally. When teachers foster an environment that promotes the modeling of caring behaviors, then students may be encouraged to act as the one caring themselves. This type of environment helps students recognize teachers as the one caring and themselves as the one being cared-for.

The outline of the theoretical framework and literature review in Chapter Two provides relevant evidence concerning student-teacher relationships. Positive student-teacher relationships are related to student motivation for learning and success (Claessens et al., 2017). This chapter also provides information on the caring behaviors that help teachers build positive relationships with students and the factors of caring that support at-risk students. The relevant literature takes a look at caring, caring behaviors, caring student-teacher relationships, and caring for at-risk students. The outline provided reveals that most of the research conducted reveals students' perspectives of the behaviors teachers demonstrate that show caring and help build student-teacher relationships. Student-teacher relationships involve the idea of caring, which students broadly define, especially in the sense of how they perceive the caring behaviors of teachers. Although there is some inclination of how teachers perceive their relationships with students both in and out of the classroom, the research is lacking in regards to teachers' perceptions of how an ethic of care helps to build positive student-teacher relationships. The voice of the teacher is important in understanding how to build and maintain relationships with students, especially students who are considered at-risk. Research has emphasized the importance of student-teacher relationships, but more qualitative research is needed to gain a better understanding of the perspectives of teachers who have experienced the phenomenon of building positive relationships with students through an ethic of care. This research study contributes to the field of knowledge by building on previous research and giving an in-depth understanding of how teachers show an ethic of care to build positive relationships with at-risk students. The study also gives insight into providing an ethic of care to create and maintain positive relationships which can be transferred to help others in the field of education.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Per its intended purpose, this study describes the school experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools in a southeastern school district. Chapter Three provides a description of the research design, the selection of participants, and a description of the site for the research. This chapter also provides a description of the research procedures, data collection, and analysis methods. The chapter discusses the trustworthiness of the data and concludes with information on the ethical issues that were considered during the research.

Design

The design of this research was qualitative because the study sought to hear the voices of teachers who had experienced the phenomenon and empower them to share their stories. A qualitative design was most appropriate for this study because individuals were examined in their natural setting, the researcher was the primary instrument, multiple methods of data were collected, and inductive and deductive logic was used to organize data and build themes that helped to provide a holistic account of the problem in the study (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative research study used a transcendental phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to understand how individuals constructed reality and gave the researcher an intimate connection with the phenomena being studied (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The use of a phenomenological approach in this study allowed the researcher to concentrate on the wholeness of the experience and search for meanings and essences of the experience in order to fully understand the individuals' shared

experiences of the phenomenon and to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

A qualitative research method was used to gain a more detailed understanding and to hear the voices of these teachers (Creswell, 2013). Multiple in-depth interviews were used to describe the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it. A transcendental phenomenological approach was necessary so that the researcher bracketed out personal experiences and focused on the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In the transcendental phenomenological approach, the researcher went through the epoche process, in this process the researcher engaged in systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments about the phenomenon in order to conduct a study that minimizes preconceptions and beliefs based on prior experiences. The epoche process gave the researcher the opportunity to focus on the unique experience of the participants by being completely open and receptive to the research participants' descriptions of their experiences with the phenomenon, while also reducing the researcher's own interpretations, biases, or theoretical concepts about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this transcendental phenomenological study:

CQ

How do teachers describe their experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools?

SQ 1

What perceptions do teachers have about the factors that contribute to building and maintaining positive relationships with at-risk students?

SQ 2

How does modeling an ethic of care impact teachers' relationships with at-risk students?

SQ 3

When modeling of an ethic of care, what do teachers perceive as the specific behaviors that help create a sense of security or belonging for at-risk students?

Setting

The site for the research was a large suburban southeastern school district consisting of 52 elementary schools, 18 middle schools, and 17 high schools. Of the 18 middle schools in this district, eight were Title I middle schools. Selected middle schools identified as Title I schools were chosen for the study. Title I schools are schools that receive federal funding to provide additional academic support to help low-achieving children meet state academic standards because they have been identified as having high percentages of children from low-income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The student demographics for this district are 45.41% Black, 31.52% White, 11.89% Hispanic, 1.82% Asian, 1.86% Native American, .48% Hawaiian/Pacific and 7.02% Other (Cumberland county schools, 2016). This school district was selected because it was large and gave the researcher a larger pool of participants. Title I schools were selected for the study because these schools had been identified as low-achieving and students attending these schools were more likely to be at-risk.

Participants

The research study used purposeful criterion sampling to select participants. Purposeful criterion sampling yielded rich information in regards to the purpose of the study (Gall et al., 2007). Because it was essential that all participants experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), teachers selected for this study were required to work in a

Title I middle school, had been employed in a Title I middle school for three or more years, and were identified by an administrator or an instructional coach as a teacher who had been able to form positive relationships with at-risk students. The anticipated sample size for the study was between 10 and 15 participants or until data saturation was obtained. Although the participants, in this case, were similar because they had all experienced the phenomenon, there were some differences in age, gender, ethnicity, behaviors, and experiences. To capture a diverse range of perspectives and to illustrate the range of variation of the phenomenon in this study, maximum variation sampling was used. Maximum variation helped the researcher view the experiences in the phenomenon from all angles, and helped the researcher find common themes or patterns within the sample (Gall et al., 2007).

Procedures

The first step of the research study was to obtain approvals. The researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and approval from the research team in the school district to conduct the research study. Upon approval, recruitment letters were sent out to the principals of all the identified Title I middle schools in the district via email. The letters explained the study and requested a face-to-face meeting with the researcher in order to share the importance and need for the study. During the meeting, principals who wished for their teachers to participate were asked to respond to the researcher with a list of teachers within their building that met the criteria of the participants for the study. Teachers selected by principals met the following criteria: positive classroom environment, good rapport with students, high levels of student academic achievement as evidenced in student report card and assessment data, little to no student discipline referrals, and little to no student absences. Upon receiving the list, the researcher sent a letter to the identified teachers via email explaining the study and solicited their

willingness to participate in the study. Once teachers agreed to participate in the study, the

researcher met with the teachers personally to explain the research study that was conducted as

well as the data collection process and allowed the participants to ask any questions necessary

for clarity. During the meeting with the teachers, teachers were asked to complete informed

consent forms (Appendix A). Information included in the consent form was the right of the

participants to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time, the purpose of the study and

procedures to be used for data collection, the protection of the participants' confidentiality,

known risks associated with the study, and the expected benefits for participants in the study

(Creswell, 2013). Individuals were also notified that upon completion of the interviews, they

would be asked to complete a photo narrative which detailed their experiences with the

phenomenon and a questionnaire which clarified the caring level of the teacher.

The Researcher's Role

For this research study, I served as the key instrument, collecting data through in-depth

interviews using open-ended questions designed by me rather than relying on questionnaires or

instruments designed by other researchers (Creswell, 2013). As the primary instrument for data

collection in this research study, it was necessary for me to engage in the Epoche process, which

allowed me to set aside prejudgments, biases and preconceived ideas about the phenomenon in

order to fully focus on the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). When this

research study was conducted, I was employed as an assistant principal in a Title I middle

School. In this role, I had witnessed teachers who had been able to form positive relationships

with at-risk students and those who had not. I had also served several years as a teacher in a

Title I middle School. As I entered the research, I brought my own success of being able to form

positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools, as well as my concern for the teachers who may have had trouble forming positive relationships with at-risk students.

I conducted this research study in a large suburban county in the southeast where I lived and worked. Out of the eight schools listed as Title I middle schools in this county, I had worked at two of the schools. However, it was important for me to choose other schools in the district where I had no authority or familiarity with the participants chosen for this study. Because of my familiarity with the research site, I was aware that there may be some influence of researcher bias. Moustakas (1994) recognizes that the challenge of the Epoche is being transparent to ourselves, allowing whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we are transparent in viewing things and open to what we discover. To bracket out my bias, it was essential for me to maintain a reflective journal (Appendix I) throughout the study. Although there were challenges, I was able to set aside any biases in order to focus on the participants of the study and tell the story of their lived experiences.

Data Collection

The data collection for the proposed research study was interviews, a questionnaire, photo narratives, and a focus group. The data collection focused on gathering good information to answer the research questions that guided the study (Creswell, 2013). The researcher used four different methods of collecting data to gain a well-rounded understanding of the experienced phenomenon of the participants in the study. The four different methods of data collection aided in the purpose of triangulation because the researcher was able to corroborate evidence from different sources and provide validity of the findings in the research (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews

The first method of data collection for the research study was the use of interviews. According to Creswell (2013), the most common form of data collection for phenomenological research is in-depth and multiple interviews with participants. Qualitative research interviews are used to obtain descriptions of the participants' experience (Moustakas, 1994). For this research study, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers who had been identified as being able to form positive relationships with at-risk students. The interviews took place following the completion of the teacher's daily classes in the school building where the teachers worked. The interview questions were open-ended and used to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers describe their experiences in forming positive relationships with at-risk students. The open-ended questions for this research were as follows:

1. Why did you get into teaching?

2. How many years have you been teaching?

3. When you first became a teacher, how would you describe your thoughts and feelings about teaching?

4. What are your teacher responsibilities now? Are these responsibilities consistent with what you expected them to be when you first became a teacher?

5. Tell me about a typical day of teaching.

6. Describe your relationships with students.

7. What do you do to foster these relationships?

8. How would you characterize your relationship with at-risk students?

9. What specifically do you do differently to foster your relationships with at-risk

students than other students?

10. How do you think your relationship with at-risk students affects the students and yourself?

11. How do students know that you care about them?

12. What are some specific things you do that show you care about your students?

13. Do you feel that at-risk students feel more secure when you show that you care? Give examples of what makes you feel this way.

14. How does your attitude towards teaching change because of your experiences with at-risk students?

15. How does working with at-risk students make your job as a teacher more challenging?

16. How would you describe the care you have for students who are considered at-risk?

17. Describe a time where you felt that an at-risk student did not respond to your efforts of caring.

18. Please share anything else you feel would help bring a better understanding to working with at-risk students.

Questions 1-5 were used as opening questions to the interview. A phenomenological interview normally begins with a social conversation aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994). These questions allowed the participants to relax and get comfortable with the researcher so that they were comfortable sharing their experiences. Questions 6-9 were more descriptive questions in the interview. These questions allowed the participants to focus on the experience and describe the experience fully (Moustakas, 1994). The description that came out of these questions showed the complexity of the experience and the

significance of the interrelatedness of the elements in the experience (Bevan, 2014).

Additionally, these questions spoke to the relationships teachers form with students. Student-

teacher relationships are a bridge to student learning and these relationships determine students'

academic and social success (Frelin & Grannas, 2010; McHugh et al., 2013; Rudasill & Rimm-

Kaufman, 2009). Questions 10-17 gave the participants an opportunity to reflect on the

phenomenon and its impact on them as teachers. Student-teacher relationships are especially

important for students who are considered at risk due to socioeconomic status or learning

difficulties; supportive relationships from teachers can contribute to positive outcomes for these

students (Anderson et al., 2011; Roorda et al., 2011). The specific behaviors of teachers both in

and out of the classroom can determine if these relationships with students are positive or

become problematic (Claessens et al., 2017). These questions further refined what the

participants experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

Question 18 was the final question and gave the participants the opportunity to add any

additional information to their experience with the phenomenon. An important aspect of

phenomenological research is for participants to have a shared experience, therefore, this

question gave participants the opportunity to share any additional information that helped

contribute to the overall essence of the study (Moustakas, 1994). Each interview was recorded

by the researcher and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Prior to conducting

interviews, the researcher conducted pilot testing of the interview questions in order to refine the

questions and the interview procedures before meeting with participants (Creswell, 2013). The

individuals participating in the pilot testing were people who represented the various subgroups

in the researcher's intended sample. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted

with pilot participants under similar conditions as the intended research. Once individual

interviews were conducted in the pilot testing, participants were asked to participate in a focus group. During the focus group session, participants were asked to provide feedback on the interview questions, as well as any suggestions on how to improve the interview questions and/or process of the interviews. Pilot testing helped the researcher to refine questions and become more comfortable with conducting the interview sessions. When the face-to-face interviews were conducted, the goal of the researcher was to discover commonalities between the experiences of the participants. The interview questions were used to guide the conversation, and the interview process continued until the saturation point, whereas the participants had no new information to add.

Questionnaire

Following the interviews, the participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire. Permission to use this questionnaire was obtained through the Copyright Clearance Center (Appendix C). The Nyberg Caring Assessment Scale (CAS) (Nyberg, 1989, 1990) was used in order to further solidify teachers as carers (Appendix D). This tool helped with the triangulation of the data. Nyberg (1989) believed that caring was more than a behavior; additionally, caring is an attitude fostered by a type of speech and movement that communicates an emotion which is caring in itself (Nyberg, 1989). This instrument was originally designed to assess nurses' perceptions of their commitment to caring (Nadelson, Nadelson, & Osguthorpe, 2010; Nyberg, 1990; Watson, 2009), however, the scale is not specific to nursing and therefore was used to assess teachers as carers in this study. The instrument required participants in this study to self-report caring attributes believed to be part of their regular or daily practice. The scale included a five-point Likert scale for participants to rate 20 items according to how often they incorporated each within their daily practice; allowing participants to express their beliefs and practices

concerning human care and caring behaviors (Bagnall, 2017; Watson, 2009). The ratings were as follows: (1) Does Not Use in Practice, (2) Occasionally Use in Practice, (3) Sometimes Use in Practice (4) Often Use in Practice, and (5) Always Use in Practice (Bagnall, 2017; Watson, 2009). The CAS had a Cronbach's alpha level of .85-.97, which made the questionnaire high in reliability of determining caring attributes (Nadelson et al., 2010; Nyberg 1990; Watson, 2009). Results of Nyberg's study revealed that nurses who scored 4.1 or higher out of 5 on the scale viewed caring as very important (Nyberg, 1989, 1990). However, there was no set scale for interpreting the composite scores in terms of levels of the participants' perceptions. Thus, for this study, the interpretation of results was adapted from a study conducted by (Nadelson et al., 2010). The interpretation of results was relative to a five-point scale, wherein a mean composite score between 1.0-2.0 represented a low practice of the participant as carer, a mean composite score of 3.0-4.0 represented an average practice of the participant as carer, and a mean composite score of 4.1-5.0 represented a high practice of the participant as carer. Once participants completed the questionnaire, the researcher calculated the mean score of each participants' questionnaire, and the participant was categorized as a low practice of participant as a carer to a high practice of participant as a carer according to this set scale.

Photo Narrative

The third method of data collection for the research study was photo narratives. When people use photography to define their world, it can often bring to light things that are taken for granted or unquestioned (Taylor, 2002). In a study conducted by Snyder (2012), teachers used disposable cameras to document the "teachers they had become" (p. 38); this form of data served as a check to the themes that were emerging from the study. Woodley-Baker (2009) used photo

narratives to look at the lived experiences of young women and their relationships to part-time, post-compulsory senior secondary education. Photo narratives were used because they best described the relationship between the image and the narrative produced after the young women collaborated. The photos and the comments gave a deeper understanding of the struggles the young women faced each day (Woodley-Baker, 2009). The use of photo narratives gives participants an active role in the research, through the selection of their photograph and through their interpretation of the photographs (Taylor, 2002).

This research study used photo narratives to demonstrate how the participants in the study viewed their overall experiences in forming positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools. Specifically, the photo narratives needed to demonstrate the teachers' perspectives of how their demonstration of an ethic of care shaped their ability to form and maintain positive relationships with at-risk students. In this study, teachers provided a digital image to the researcher using a cell phone or computer image that encompassed their overall experiences in forming positive relationships with at-risk students. Teachers included a short narrative with the digital image that further clarified their perspectives. The digital image and narrative were shared with the researcher via email using a word document. Appendix G shows the photo narrative instructions that were given to participants.

Within the narratives, teachers were required to explain the relationship between the digital image and their lived experiences of forming relationships with at-risk students. Additionally, the participants were asked to ensure that their photos and narratives provided a deeper understanding of their experiences, which would allow their voices to be heard. Appendix H provides a sample of a participant's photo narrative. The brief narratives told a story which depicted the lived experiences of the participants. The digital photo narratives were analyzed by

the researcher to help identify common themes among the participants. Participants were asked to generate the photo narrative at the conclusion of their interview sessions. Participants were given a one week time period to return the photo narratives to the researcher.

Focus Group

The final method of data collection for the research study was a focus group interview. The focus group consisted of 6 teachers who were participants in the study. The focus group gave the researcher the opportunity to interact with the participants at the same time. The focus group questions were similar to the interview questions in that they were semi-structured, open-ended questions. The selected participants for the focus group had a face-face meeting with the researcher. The focus group meeting took place in a neutral setting after the completion of the individual interviews. The focus group session was audio recorded by the researcher. Participants gave permission for the recording during the initial meeting with the researcher. After the group completed greetings, the researcher led the focus group interview session. The researcher posed a question to generate a discussion among the participants. Participants were asked to be courteous of each other and to listen while others were speaking. After participants were given the opportunity to respond to individual questions and discuss, the researcher moved on to the next question, until all questions were asked and discussed. Once the researcher had asked all questions, members of the group were able to share any comments they had that came about after listening to other people speak. During focus group sessions, participants are able to draw on personal experiences and witness the experiences of others (McHugh et al., 2013). The focus group interview questions were as follows:

1. Please introduce yourself to the group.

2. Describe your role in fostering positive relationships with at-risk students.

3. What experiences of forming relationships with at-risk students have been most significant to how you interact with and care for students overall?

4. Describe how you have modeled caring to at-risk students.

5. What is your perception of how at-risk students respond to your modeling of care?

6. What overall feelings do you get from being able to form positive relationships with at-risk students?

7. What would you like to see more of when it comes to how teachers deal with and care for at-risk students?

Question 1 was used as an opening question to create a relaxed and trusting atmosphere amongst the researcher and the group of research participants (Moustakas, 1994). Questions 2-6 were more descriptive questions which gave the group the opportunity to describe their account of their experiences in full detail and witness the experience of others (McHugh et al., 2013; Moustakas, 1994). When teachers show continuous support to at-risk students, there is a positive effect on the child's overall development and academic and social success (Spilt, Hughes, Kwok, & Wu, 2012). Tough (2016) suggested that teachers form meaningful relationships with at-risk students and create an environment where students feel a sense of belonging and support. Question 7 gave the participants the opportunity to provide insight into how teachers should deal with at-risk students. As a component of care theory, teachers are identified as having a responsibility to care for students and a responsibility to teach them to care (Noddings, 2002; Trout, 2012).

Data Analysis

Data analysis used the Moustakas (1994) method for a transcendental phenomenological research study. The process began with a necessary first step which Moustakas (1994) describes

as the Epoche, followed by phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation. Phenomenological reduction includes bracketing of personal experiences, horizonalization, turning horizons into themes, and writing a description of what the participants experienced to include textural descriptions, structural descriptions, and composite descriptions. Bracketing allowed the researcher to focus solely on the topic and research question. During the horizonalization process, the researcher deleted statements that were irrelevant to the research topic and kept significant statements that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). After horizonalization, clusters of themes were formed by grouping units of meaning together which helped the researcher find units of significance and form the textural description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Sadala & Adorno, 2001).

Following this process, imaginative variation sought to grasp the structural essence of the experience, which was a description of the context that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). During imaginative variation, the researcher was able to recognize underlying themes and consider universal structures as themes that referenced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). During the final step of the data analysis, structural and textural descriptions were integrated in order to arrive at a textural-structural synthesis of meanings to form an essence of the experiences that were investigated and to portray the phenomenon as a whole (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher analyzed all of the data collected to generate themes that allowed for a better understanding of the phenomenon of the study and wrote a composite summary which reflected the textural and structural descriptions from which the themes emerged (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness; credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability must be addressed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Creswell, 2013). In this research study, member checking, external audits, and triangulation were used to ensure trustworthiness.

Credibility

Prolonged engagement in the field and triangulation of data are suggested to establish credibility (Creswell, 2013). In this research study, member checking was used so that participants could check the credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2013). During this member check, participants gave specific feedback to let the researcher know if the information reported was accurate, credible, and valid.

Dependability and Confirmability

"Both dependability and confirmability are established through an auditing of the research process" (Creswell, 2013 p. 246). In this research study, an external audit was used to examine if the findings were supported by the data (Creswell, 2013). This aided in determining the dependability of the research study. Additionally, triangulation was used for corroboration of evidence (Creswell, 2013). This helped establish the confirmability within the research study.

Transferability

Transferability ensured that the research findings were transferable between the researcher and the participants of the study (Creswell, 2013). In this research study, a rich, thick description of the participants and the setting were used to allow readers to see transferability (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

A qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues during data collection, analysis, and dissemination of qualitative reports (Creswell, 2013). Researchers must maintain ethical standards by establishing clear agreements with the research participants, obtaining informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality (Moustakas, 1994). Several ethical issues were addressed throughout this research study. Approval from Liberty University's (IRB) as well as local approval from the school district's research team was obtained before any research data was collected. With the use of a computer, the researcher ensured that the qualitative data was organized and stored in a secure manner (Creswell, 2013). Participants were asked to complete informed consent forms during the initial meeting. Information included in the consent form was the right of the participants to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time, the purpose of the study and procedures used for data collection, the protection of the participants' confidentiality, known risks associated with the study, and the expected benefits for participants in the study (Creswell, 2013). Other ethical considerations discussed the purpose of the study and how the data was used with participants, using pseudonyms to protect participants' identities, and reporting honestly (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

This chapter provides a description of the transcendental phenomenological methodology used for this study. The rationale for using a transcendental phenomenological methodology was stated and justified. A detailed description of the site and participants was provided and research procedures, data collection, and data analysis was addressed. The procedures used to strengthen trustworthiness in the study was discussed, and the chapter concluded with a discussion of the ethical considerations for the research study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study describes the experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools in a southeastern school district. The research seeks to uncover a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and the impact on the teachers who experience it. To gain insight into the experiences of the participants, the central, overarching research question is: How do teachers describe their experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools? The sub-questions are as follows: (SQ1) What perceptions do teachers have about the factors that contribute to building and maintaining positive relationships with at-risk students? (SQ2) How does modeling an ethic of care impact teachers' relationships with at-risk students? (SQ3) When modeling of an ethic of care, what do teachers perceive as the specific behaviors that help create a sense of security or belonging for at-risk students?

The presentation of the findings allows the voices of the participants to come through in thick, rich, detailed descriptions, which is a key component of qualitative, phenomenological research. Data analysis using phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) shows themes across all data collection methods: face-to-face interviews, questionnaires, photo narratives, and the focus group interview. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings and includes the textural, structural, and composite descriptions of the participants who experienced the phenomenon.

Participants

A selection of 15 teachers participated in this study. The criterion-sampling plan sought to interview participants based on a list of qualifying teachers selected by their principals. A

total of 26 potential participants were selected by principals because they met the criteria for the study; however, only 15 volunteered to participate. The participants in the study were from varying backgrounds and possessed different characteristics concerning age, ethnicity, content specifics, grade levels taught, and the number of years in education. Four of the participants were male and eleven were female. Appendix B displays participant demographics. Pseudonyms were used to uphold the confidentiality of the participants. The 15 participants represented a variety of middle school teachers from four different schools in a large, suburban, southeastern school district.

Ally

Ally was a 49-year-old African-American female with 9 years of experience as an 8th grade Science teacher. Ally expressed that when she first began teaching, it was challenging but it just felt natural. As a teacher, she took on the responsibility of preparing students for life beyond the classroom. She wanted her students to make an impact on the world, and she encouraged her students to keep going even when they felt like they were stuck.

Ally described her relationship with students as mom and child, and she referred to her students as "my babies." She felt that each one of her students had their own story and it was important to her to get to know them on an individual level. Communication and sharing her own life stories allowed her to relate to her students and get to the root of their behavior. Ally stated that getting students to trust her was a big part of helping them to feel safe, and once students trusted her, they often came to her when things were wrong instead of lashing out or fighting.

Andy

Andy was a 48-year-old Caucasian male serving as a 6th grade Social Studies teacher. He was retired military but had been teaching middle school for 7 years. As a first-year teacher, he was overwhelmed. Coming out of the military, he was used to a structure that middle school students just didn't have. He explained that although he was hired as a Social Studies teacher, that was the tiniest part of what he imparted on his students daily.

Andy's classroom structure was very routine, but he loved his students, and he often tried to ensure his lessons focused on things the students liked in order to make a connection with them. Humor was a big part of Andy's classroom and he often used humor to connect with his students, especially his at-risk students. Andy mentioned that his relationships with at-risk students sometimes developed over time. There were some students that he could make immediate connections with, but some required more of his attention. Andy acknowledged that building relationships with at-risk students allowed him to see his growth as a teacher.

Ann

Ann was a 67-year-old African-American female in her 12th year of teaching. She taught 7th grade Science. Ann's expectations of who she needed to be as a teacher were different than what she had encountered as a teacher. Because of her own experiences with school, Ann expected to teach students and be a nurturer, however, she wasn't expecting all the additional things that went along with being a teacher. She felt that planning, preparation, and structure helped her get through her daily interactions of being a teacher.

Ann set expectations for students at the beginning of the year, and her consistency with sticking to her expectations aided in building her relationships with students. When working with at-risk students, Ann stated that her favorite saying was, "How you bounce the ball

determines where you're going to be." She used this saying to help her students understand that she was there to help them and they had to be willing to receive the help in order to move forward. She described times where these students had behavioral or other issues, and she said whenever they returned to class, she always asked, "Are you ready to start over again?" It was important to Ann to help students understand that she was there for them, and she felt that the challenges in working with at-risk students were something that was just a part of her duty of teaching.

Ashe

Ashe was a 27-year-old Caucasian female in her 5th year of teaching 7th grade Math. When Ashe first became a teacher, she thought it would be easy, however, she quickly had a reality check and even wondered if teaching was really for her. She imparted that it was the excitement of her students that reassured her that she was made for teaching. She reminded herself daily by saying, "It's not always about you; it's about the kids. And, yes, you're made for this."

Ashe started every day of class off with a greeting to her students and a check-in about anything from the previous night. She described her relationship with students as being that of a mother or counselor. Ashe had a positive outlook when it came to working with at-risk students because she felt that these students often lacked positivity at home. She looked at students as her own children and tried her best to meet their needs. Ashe revealed that while working with at-risk students, she sometimes goes home worried or even feeling beat down, wondering if she has truly done everything she could for her students.

Brandy

Brandy was a 48-year-old African-American female in her 10th year of teaching. At the time of the interview, she was teaching 6th grade English and Social Studies. Brandy expressed during the interview that in the beginning of her teaching career, she was not sure how long she would last because it all felt overwhelming. Brandy contributed her success with students as being able to differentiate learning to meet the needs of the students. When she felt a student was not learning in her classroom, she always sought out additional resources.

Brandy stated that to build her relationships with students, she took on a motherly approach. It was important to her to find out more about her students when they came into her classroom and to reveal herself to students as she got to know them. She held high expectations for students, and she created a classroom environment where students felt safe to fail. She knew this type of environment would give students the opportunity to open up and reveal their true selves and empower them to be successful. Brandy felt that at-risk students lives did not change daily but rather by the moment. Therefore, it was important for her to show care so that they would feel safe and secure while they were in her classroom. She described her care to carrying a raw egg, stating that "although your arms get tired, you still have to hold on, and give the egg that same amount of care from the beginning to the end."

Bre

Bre was a 27-year-old Caucasian female in her 6th year of teaching Math and Science. Teaching was a life-long dream for Bre, and she felt that she had prepared for it since she was a little girl. She described her feelings as indifferent when she first started teaching. Teaching was not exactly what she expected, but she refused to give up on her life-long dream.

Bre thought that her bubbly personality helped her to feed off the energy of her middle school students. She believed her relationships with students was friendly, like being around family. Consistent communication with her students, helped her to build up relationships with them. She met students where they were, got on their level, had one-on-one conversations, and always greeted them at the door. Bre described her relationship with at-risk students as making a connection and refusing to allow students to fall through the cracks. She felt that at-risk students not only needed a connection with the teacher, but they needed to also have a connection to the school.

Bob

Bob was a 30-year-old African American male in his 7th year of teaching. He taught 7th grade English and Language Arts. Bob got into teaching because he loved the content area and he wanted to touch lives. He admitted that when he first began teaching it was sort of a honeymoon phase, however, he quickly learned that each student is different and you have to cater to their individuality. Bob felt that his biggest responsibility as a teacher was to get to know his students and to be able to meet their needs and address their strengths and weaknesses.

For Bob, it was important to have a real relationship with students that was firm and caring. When working with at-risk students, he acknowledged that he normally gave more consideration, compassion, and understanding. Bob was also an at-risk student who was able to overcome his challenges. He mentioned that he saw himself in a lot of his students, therefore, it was imperative to him to provide purposeful and well-intentioned care towards his students. Bob believed that being patient with students and finding time to laugh with them were critical aspects of building positive relationships.

Candi

Candi was a 61-year-old African-American female, Resource teacher, who taught all Core subjects (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies) at the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade level. She was in her 20th year of teaching, and had worked in Title I schools her entire career. Candi originally went to school to be an artist, but after growing bored, her advisor convinced her to take a class in education. During the interview, Candi stated that one class turned into a career and she fell in love. Candi admitted that in the beginning of her teaching career, she encountered some difficulty, but she made a decision that she was not going to get defeated, she knew teaching was her purpose, so she made some changes and kept pushing.

Candi stated that she felt that it was her responsibility as a teacher to grow her students, academically, physically, and mentally, which is why she created a positive family-oriented classroom that held high expectations. With her students, she found time to laugh, cry, chat, and get serious in discussions about bullying and criticism. She cared for and loved her students deeply and as a result committed to building life-long relationships, stating, "Relationships to me are always above everything else. If I don't have a relationship, I cannot teach them."

Dean

Dean was a 41-year-old African-American male in his 18th year of teaching. He was a veteran Social Studies teacher. When Dean first started teaching, he contemplated staying in teaching or going into another field, but he decided to stay with teaching and he came to enjoy it. He remembered that when he first came into teaching he had a lot of responsibilities that he was not necessarily prepared for, but those responsibilities had prepared him to become the teacher he was at the time of the interview.

Dean was good at developing different relationships with different students. He felt that he would often serve as a father figure, a brother or uncle, and even a preacher. His relationships with students depended a lot on student needs. He admitted that he tended to gravitate towards students who were considered at-risk because "those students need a little extra time and a little extra care." Dean was not shy about telling students that he loved them; he felt it was necessary because sometimes students did not hear it at home. Over the years of working with at-risk students, he learned to be more conscious at trying to guard himself against hurt, because of some experiences of not being successful with these students. However, for Dean, each year of his teaching career began with excitement that he could experience success with students, even if those students had been unsuccessful in previous years.

Ellie

Ellie was a 35-year-old African-American female in her 6th year of teaching 6th grade English and Language Arts. Ellie described her first experiences of teaching as overwhelming. She quickly learned that there was a lot more to teaching than just helping students learn. As she progressed in teaching, she understood that it was important for her to create a classroom environment that was calm and welcoming because this helped students' minds focus on learning.

Ellie's students were like her own children. She set high expectations for her students by forming connections with them, getting to know them personally, and letting them know that she loved and cared for them. She felt that at-risk students often found refuge in her classroom because of her welcoming classroom environment and one-on-one communication with these students helped them feel secure enough to open up to her about anything. Ellie disclosed that

although working with at-risk students can be draining and challenging, each day of teaching came with new expectations.

Keema

Keema was a 52-year-old African-American female in her 9th year of teaching. She taught 6th grade Math and Science. After working in the auto industry for over 10 years, she got into teaching because she wanted to help the community and make a difference. One of Keema's fondest memories in the beginning of her teaching career was when she was able to turnaround a class that had great academic and behavior difficulties. As a teacher she noted, "I always have luck with the ones everybody thinks can't be saved, and those are the ones that can be saved."

Keema was compassionate and humble towards her students, and she believed that your heart has to be into teaching in order to do it well. Keema learned the individual needs of each student and stated that she does not teach the last student like the first student because each student has their own individual needs. She made students feel important and pushed them to their fullest potential. She also invited students into her world and made sure she taught the whole child.

Lenny

Lenny was a 42-year-old African-American male with 20 years of teaching experience. He wanted to be a teacher because of the influences his teachers and coaches had on him as a young man. When Lenny first started as a teacher, his initial thoughts were that he would be able to come in and immediately change lives, however, he was not prepared for the challenges that came along with teaching. As a veteran teacher, he understood the importance of forming a

connection with his students; and after teaching in the same school for 20 years, he still had great relationships with students and was still connected with students from his first year of teaching.

Lenny connected with the families and communities of his students. Getting students one-on-one and letting them know they had a person to talk to helped students to open up to him, especially at-risk students. Lenny stated that children have a natural way of knowing when someone cares, and by talking with them, complimenting them, providing them with new experiences, and getting to know them personally, his students knew he cared. He thought that relating to students and setting standards for them was an important way to build relationships, expressing, "A student may never remember what you teach them, but they will always remember the way you treat them."

Mary

Mary was a 34-year-old African American female in her 12th year of teaching. She taught 7th grade Social Studies. Mary recalled that when she first became a teacher, she worried if she would be able to give students what they needed. As time progressed, Mary expressed that her relationships with students allowed her to give them what they needed by being a mentor and sometimes even taking on a motherly role. She used interest surveys and inventories to get to know students better and to solicit their feedback on ways to make the classroom setting better.

Mary admitted that she often gave more of herself to students who were considered at-risk. These were the students who needed the encouragement that it was possible to make it in spite of their current circumstance. She often told these students, "we're going places," because many of them needed reminders or needed to be told for the first time. Mary had a positive outlook about working with at-risk students and she considered every day to be a new day.

When asked how her relationships with at-risk students affected her, Mary uttered, "I don't ever want to feel like I failed my students, not that they failed me, but that I failed them."

Reese

Reese was a 44-year-old African-American female with 20 years of teaching experience. Reese thought she would be a good teacher because she was a good student. However, she explained that when she first became a teacher, she was not prepared, so she struggled for the first few years. Reese built relationships with students by setting an expectation and being consistent and honest with her students. She treated each student as an individual and she adjusted her practices to meet their needs because each student had a different story.

Reese attributed her care for students as taking on a parental role and being an advocate for her students. Communication was a very important part of teaching for Reese. Each morning she greeted her students at the door, and she also told them to have a good day, each day that they left. She stated:

> I greet my students every morning, and I tell them to have a good day at the end of every
>
> day, even the students that got on my last nerve for the day, because it sets a precedent.
>
> The precedent that yes, you had a bad day in here and some behavior issues, but your
>
> slate is clean. See you tomorrow. When you come in here tomorrow, your slate is clean.

When dealing with at-risk students, her communication was more one-on-one because she thought this was necessary in order to get to the root of what the students really needed physically, emotionally, and academically.

Sue

Sue was a 55-year-old African-American female in her 14th year of teaching. She taught 7th grade English and Language Arts. During the interview, she admitted that over the years she

had learned that being in the classroom was about way more than just teaching. In the beginning

of her teaching career, she had to adapt to the job itself because there was some difficulty getting

her point across to her students, but each year it had gotten better. She remembered that when

she first started teaching, she thought she could just go in and teach her subject, but she realized

that as a teacher she had to build a relationship with her students by getting to know each one

individually. Sue believed that teachers must be approachable for students to receive them. She

had great communication with her students and a positive outlook each day, despite any

challenges to the previous day. Sue's motto as a teacher was "Every day is a new day."

Results

The results of this study were identified through the analysis of individual interviews, a

questionnaire, photo narratives, and a focus group interview. Each of the participants repeated

many of the same experiences throughout the individual and focus group interviews.

Additionally, the questionnaire and photo narratives further supported the themes derived from

the interviews.

During the process, the researcher bracketed personal experiences and thoughts about the

phenomenon and analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) method for qualitative analysis. The

researcher uploaded all documents into Atlas.ti8 to create an initial generation of codes. The

program allowed the researcher to upload and code multiple documents, including individual

interviews, photo narratives, and the focus group interview. After initial coding, the codes were

reviewed equally to determine its importance to the experience of teachers' forming positive

relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools. Any non-essential codes that did not

relate to the experience as a whole were removed and then the codes were reorganized using the

Atlas.ti8 software. Following this, the merged codes resulted in connected meanings and

allowed the researcher to identify themes related to the four research questions. The results of

the questionnaire gave the researcher additional insight to conclude the participants in this study

as caring individuals. Appendix E shows participants' results from the questionnaire. The

questionnaire revealed that 3 out of the 15 participants had a mean composite score between 3.80

and 3.90, and the remaining 12 participants had a mean score of 4.20-5.00. Therefore according

to the set scale in the study conducted by Nadelson et al. (2010), 3 of the participants were

categorized as representing an average practice of the participant as a carer, and the other 12

participants were categorized as representing a high practice of the participant as a carer. The

sum data from the questionnaires corroborated the themes that were generated during coding.

Finally, research participants reviewed individual transcripts and generated themes. This

member checking, allowed participants to check the credibility of the findings and provide the

researcher feedback on if the information was accurate, credible, and valid (Creswell, 2013).

The participants agreed that the transcripts and themes truthfully represented their responses.

The data analysis in this research helped to generate three themes and provide answers to the

study's research questions explaining teachers' experiences of forming positive relationships

with at-risk students in Title I middle schools. After phenomenological reduction and

synthesizing textural and structural descriptions, three themes were generated from this research:

Relentless Efforts to Care, Selfless Connections, and Maturing Teacher Practices. Appendix F

lists the themes that emerged and the codes that contributed to the themes.

Theme Development

Theme 1: Relentless Efforts to Care

The first identified theme was Relentless Efforts to Care. During the interviews, photo

narrative reflections, and focus group discussion, it became clear to the researcher that it was

very important to these teachers that their students felt cared for. To them, it took more than just showing up to teach when working with at-risk students. The teachers recognized that they needed to be consistent in their efforts to give care. Ann, Bob, Bre, Ellie, Lenny, and Reese all stressed the importance of being consistent with practices, procedures, and expectations. Lenny also added that a family relationship develops, when at-risk students see consistency with their teachers. He stated, "When you think about the teachers that have the most influence with at-risk students, it's normally the teachers that have been at the school for a while…these teachers often know and understand families, so students feel more free to talk to them." The teachers went above and beyond what was outlined in their daily duties because they knew their at-risk students required more of their love and care. Even with rejections from at-risk students and the overwhelming feeling of dealing with difficult students, the teachers returned to school daily with the intent to give care to their students no matter what.

During the interview process, Ann, Sue, and Bre spoke about the resilience it takes to show up to work every day ready to give your all to students. Ann indicated, "You've got to be willing to do whatever it takes for the child." Sue added to this by saying, "Every day is a new day." Bre expressed,

> You have to have the drive and the heart to put in a little more effort and a little more work. It's seeing a change in the child or growth in a child. If that's what guides you, then you're going to keep pushing through whatever challenge you have.

These ladies along with the other participants were willing to do whatever it took to meet the needs of their students and they pushed themselves to and give care daily. Mary, Dean, and Keema admitted that they often give a little more care to their at-risk students than other students

because they need it most. Although caring for at-risk students was not easy, the participants were determined and committed to providing a caring relationship with their students.

The participants had to have perseverance and an incessant effort to put forth care to their students. Andy, Candi, and Mary all recognized that they had a responsibility for reaching at-risk students and they had to press through challenges in order to make connections with students, because they knew there was potential beneath the hard outer shell that at-risk students sometimes put out.

Andy shared,

> Obviously, there are some who I can reach out and connect with real quick. But there are some it takes a lot of perseverance, a lot of trial and error, and a lot of sitting in my car going, "What did I do right, what did I do wrong, how can I fix this?" Sometimes it just pops into my head. Sometimes it's completely out of the blue. I encourage a lot of teachers that I've talked to, or especially new teachers, to look for these moments.

Although it became tiresome at times, these participants somehow found the energy to keep giving care to their students. Candi expressed,

> I feel a sense of responsibility. I feel like it's my honor and duty to give back to society because of what was put in me. I feel that it's a revolving door. Even though we feel like we give, give, give, the kids give to us as well. That's what helps us go on to the next year. We probably all say the same thing, "That's it. I'm tired." But somehow we get rejuvenated. We begin to weed out the bad things that happen and focus more on the good things that are happening to help us to move forward to the next year. I think it's not just one thing. I think there are many factors of how we feel working with at-risk kids.

Additionally, Mary shared,

It's hard not to give them more care. You feel like you can see so much potential. Then

they just need a little bit more nurturing. It's just like the small plant that sits in the shade

versus the plant that's out in the sun. Sometimes my at-risk kids don't realize they've

been in the shade for a little while. Whenever you give them a little bit of sunlight, all of

a sudden, they blossom.

Mary also communicated in her photo narrative that the growth of a plant best illustrated her

overall experiences of working with at-risk students. She wrote:

Sometimes the care and attention work to make the students grow into the best versions

of themselves in spite of their environment and other times it may not have an impact at

all because the environment has a higher amount of control over their outcome…Over

my time as a teacher of at-risk students, I have seen many flowers bloom and go on to do

great things and I have also the opposite happen as well to students that could have done

well if not for bad decisions.

These teachers were determined to give care because they felt that it was their duty and

responsibility. Each day was a new day for them, and so each day they returned with new

expectations. Both Ellie and Sue talked about each day being a new day with new expectations,

and Ann asserted that she gives the students grace each day. Candi added that she did not let the

rejection of one at-risk student deter her from giving care to other students. The teachers had the

expectation that students would do better or respond differently, and thus their efforts of care

were relentless.

Theme 2: Selfless Connections

The second identified theme came about after recognizing that these teachers often put the students' needs above their own. The teachers were self-denying and compassionate, and they set aside their own feelings and needs to meet the immediate needs of their students. The interviews, photo narrative reflections, and focus group interviews revealed that for the participants, the most important thing was forming connections with their students. They felt that a connection was needed in order to reach their students on any level, including emotionally and academically. They knew teaching could not take place until there was a connection and a relationship with their students. Andy added to this belief by saying, "So, whatever tool I can use, I try to connect with them first, teach them second." During the focus group interview, Andy admitted to the group that his views on connecting with students had changed since he first started teaching. He stated,

> When I first started, I wanted to know how to get the students to connect with me, but
> now I find out their interests which makes it easier to make a connection because the
> students can see that I'm on their side, that I'm trying to help. It's really helped me to
> make connections with students' needs instead of trying to get them to fit into my world.

Ally, Bre, and Ellie voiced similar statements that spoke to the importance of forming connections with their students in order to reach them. In her photo narrative, Ally wrote:

> It is important to me that I connect with my students and get to know them. Each has
> their own relationship with me but all of them know that I truly love their life. I get to
> give them a piece of knowledge and a peek into what their life could be if they focus and
> take their education seriously. I just want to open a door for them and guide them to walk
> through so that they can see all of the opportunities that are available to them.

During the interview, Bre mentioned that her relationships with at-risk students came from making a connection with them and allowing them to have a connection with the school. When asked how she characterized her relationships with at-risk students, she responded, "Just by making a connection with them, not letting them fall within the cracks…You also want them to have a connection to the school in some way, somehow." Ellie imparted,

> You got to become personal with the students; try to understand them, find something that helps you to connect with them. It could be hard, but there's got to be one little thing that we can connect and share on, even if it's commenting on the polish on their nails. You got to find something you can connect with the students on personally.

Additionally, Ellie added,

> My attitude towards teaching changes each day. Each day comes with new expectations. Even though dealing with at-risk students can be kind of draining, I always accept the challenge to find a new way to reach them. I think that's what drives me. I always say, Okay, I need another way to reach them. This didn't work. I need another way to seek that connection with them. So, I accept the challenge, and I come in every day with a positive attitude ready to go ahead and just take it on and see what else different I can do to make an impact.

Connections were important, but it was not necessarily easy. The teachers expressed the need to be flexible and willing to make changes to connect with at-risk students. Bob said, "You have to expect the unexpected, you need a plan and a back-up plan." Andy said, "You can't have a rigid teaching style…with at-risk students, what works one day may not work the next, so you have to be flexible and think outside the box." Lenny added, "When working with at-risk students, you

have to work harder at planning and finding relevant materials, some days are not going to go as planned, you have to be flexible."

Working with at-risk students often presented challenges for the teachers that could not be overcome without the teachers putting themselves aside to focus on the needs of the students. These teachers knew they had to give love, empathy, compassion, and understanding in order to form connections with their students. In fact, they often gave when they didn't even have it to give. When Keema spoke about making connections, she expressed, "I think those daily hugs, those smiles when I don't even have a smile, but I know when I walk in those doors that it's not about me." She along with other participants were able to be self-sacrificing in an effort to connect with students. Ally, Mary, Ashe, Dean, and Bob described their connections as being that of a parent. Ally said, "They're my babies, they are, they're my babies…the relationship doesn't stop when they leave me." Mary testified, "If they need me to be mom and teacher, I do both…I treat them like my own children and because I do that, they feel comfortable."
Ashe added,

> I would describe it as treating them like my own because I would not want to have my own children grow up in anything that they're going through. So, I do anything I can to make sure that even though they're not my own, I treat them like my own…I make sure they are on the right path.

These teachers often took on a parental role and even expressed parental emotions when it came to connecting to at-risk students. Dean made the statement, "One thing I'm not shy about telling my students is that I love them. I tell them that we're not going to agree all the time, but I do love them. Sometimes they don't get that at home. I think it's necessary."
Bob added,

I definitely go home thinking about my students and their different issues and how I can help…working with at-risk students does that to you because you know that they may live in poverty, that they may not have both parents in the home. Or if they have both parents, it may not be a healthy relationship. They have these issues, so I go home thinking about that sometimes and what my role is. Sometimes I have some guilt. So, that is the difference between working with at-risk students and maybe a school that doesn't have a higher at-risk population.

During the focus group interview, Lenny expressed that for him making connections with students was 24 hours because his role as teacher and coach often extended beyond the school day. It was clear that these teachers made connections with students. Their connections with students showed their love and genuine care for students. Both Candi and Sue specifically described their care as genuine during their individual interviews. Many times, the teachers had to set their own emotions and feelings aside because their first priority was forming connections with their students. Keema and Dean mentioned that they often gave care and tried to connect with students even when they did not feel like doing so. Likewise, Brandy seemed to sum up the gentleness of the care teachers gave when making connections with students when she compared her care for at-risk students to carrying an egg. She stated,

I would describe my care as carrying a raw egg…although your arms get tired, you still have to hold on, and give the egg that same amount of care from the beginning to the end…because the egg is still there, and you have to hold on.

Brandy called this kind of care, "careful care." For these teachers, the connections with the students was more important than being overwhelmed or overworked. No matter how hard it

seemed, these teachers overcame their own emotions and feelings to do what seemed best for students.

Theme 3: Maturing Teacher Practices

Each teacher communicated that when they first became teachers, their expectations were much different than their realities. When they began to grow as teachers, they realized that they would have to adapt to teaching practices that best met the needs of their students. The interviews, photo narrative reflections, and focus group interview revealed the third identified theme of Maturing Teacher Practices.

One of the keywords that emerged from the interviews with the participants was "differentiate." Many of the participants recognized that in order to reach their at-risk students, they would need to do teaching a little different. Sue, Ally, Keema, and Reese had similar statements about the different needs of students. Sue made the statement, "You have to find what works for each child…You have different students, different needs." Ally said, "Just realizing that each one of them has a different story, all students are not the same." Keema affirmed, "Learn the individual needs of each student. Each one doesn't have the same story…I don't teach the first one like the last one; everybody has their own individual needs." Reese added,

> I take at-risk student by student; I don't jumble them all in one because every at-risk child has got a different story. They may have some characteristics that are the same or some backgrounds that might be the same, but it's a different student.

The participants recognized that although there were challenges, it was important for them to find ways to reach their at-risk students academically, socially, and emotionally. Keema, Candi, Ellie, Lenny, Andy, and Bre all described some of the challenges that come with teaching at-risk students. They also revealed how they try to overcome the challenges. Keema mentioned,

"there's no down time," when working with at-risk students, but they are children and we have to find ways to keep working with them. Candi expressed that the most challenging part of working with at-risk students is that she cannot always reach them and sometimes when she does, they end up hurting her. However, she did not let the hurt deter her from continuously reaching out to students. Both Ellie and Lenny mentioned that they were not prepared for the challenges that came along with teaching at-risk students. During his interview, Lenny stated,

> Because you have to work harder with planning, finding materials for them, being able to relate the now to what they are doing, to make it relevant. Some days are not going to go as planned. Sometimes with at-risk kids, they bring a lot of things from home outside. You might come in and have this wonderful lesson plan, but they had a bad night. They come in angry. They're ready to fight other kids. Now you have to switch up. You have more days like that that cause you to have to change everything. Now, you have to be flexible.

Andy gave the following statement:

> Building relationships with at-risk students can be challenging, and oftentimes frustratingly difficult. Regardless, just as we differentiate our assignments according to academic achievement, so we should differentiate our behaviors to provide our at-risk students the same education as their peers.

Bre also spoke about the challenges and the necessity of reaching at-risk students where they are. When asked if working with at-risk students was challenging to her teaching practices, she said,

> Challenging but in a good way… There are some times when it's just like, How am I going to break the lesson down so I can reach where they're at? So, a lot of times, I break

the lesson…You have to do a lot of differentiation which takes up time, but they need

that.

Bre also communicated the following statement in her photo narrative response, "I have watched

and listened to students over the years to see how they wanted to learn in a classroom and I have

adapted/enhanced my teaching style to incorporate students' needs."

Because the participants were determined to reach their at-risk students, they were

flexible in their teaching practices. They realized that when working with at-risk students, they

would need to do things a little differently than their interactions with other students. They also

recognized that when working with at-risk students, patience was very important. Ally, Ashe,

Bob, and Reese all admitted that working with at-risk students made them more patient and

humble. Forming positive relationships with at-risk students wasn't something that occurred

overnight. Andy characterized his relationships with at-risk students by saying, "It takes a lot of

perseverance, a lot of trial and error, and a lot of thinking, what went right, what went wrong,

and how can I fix it?" As teachers matured in their teaching practices, there was much trial and

error and changes had to take place in order to see results and success. Although working with

at-risk students presented a slightly different expectation of teaching for the participants, they

adapted and their teaching practices matured as they worked more closely with at-risk students.

Research Questions

Central Question 1: How do teachers describe their experiences of forming positive

relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools?

Although each teacher had their own significant experiences of forming positive

relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools, their overall experiences were

revealed and related directly to the themes developed in the research. The interviews, photo

narrative reflections, and focus group interview unveiled that the teachers all experienced relentless efforts to care, selfless connections, and maturing teacher practices when forming positive relationships with at-risk students. At times, the journey to forming these relationships was frustrating and challenging, but the teachers were committed to making connections with their at-risk students. Ashe, Andy, and Candi shared similar statements about the challenges of forming these positive relationships with at-risk students. According to Ashe, "There are those select kids that no matter what you do to try to help them, they're going to not want your help, but you still keep trying to build that relationship with them." Andy said, "What makes my job most challenging is not knowing how the student will react to what I'm trying to do." Candi shared,

> It's definitely challenging because there are times when you can't reach those students. There are times when you build a relationship and they turn around and hurt you. I know I've been hurt a couple of times, and it makes you not want to put yourself out there. But I know that sometimes we're all they have, so I can't let one child in one situation deter me from helping another child.

Despite the challenges associated with forming positive relationships with at-risk students, these teachers made the decision to push forth, even if they experienced rejection from the students. For these teachers, their continuous efforts to care helped them form positive relationships with their at-risk students. Both Ellie and Lenny spoke about having consistent and continuous communication and care with students. Ellie asserted, "They see me returning every day. So they know I care because I come back… I stay on them…and I'm consistent with what I say to them" Lenny communicated,

I feel that at-risk students do put up a block because a lot of times, they don't have

someone at home that they can confide in or that understands them. Sometimes, at-risk

kids, they have different expectations at home. So, I do feel that at-risk kids, once they

find out that you care about them, they're going to do whatever you need working with

those students. They're going to go to bat for you, they're going to work hard for you.

And they are disappointed when they don't meet your expectation.

Although their expectations of teaching changed and developed while working with at-risk

students, the teachers were able to share their true feelings about what it takes to form positive

relationships with the students, it wasn't always easy, but the teachers refused to give up.

Sub-Question 1: What perceptions do teachers have about the factors that contribute to

building and maintaining positive relationships with at-risk students?

Many of the teachers voiced what they believed were the factors that contributed to the

building and maintaining of their positive relationships with at-risk students. The teachers

realized that making connections with the students was an important step to building and

maintaining relationships with their students. During the interviews, every participant mentioned

making connections with students through things such as mentoring, motivating, giving time and

communication, being relatable, and taking on a parental role as a way to build and maintain

relationships with their at-risk students. The teachers had to get to know the students, show

continuous efforts to care, and adapt teaching practices to meet the needs of the students in order

to build and maintain these relationships. Both Ellie and Bob spoke about getting to know

students personally. Ellie voiced,

You got to become personal with the students; try to understand them, find something

that helps you to connect with them. It could be hard, but there's got to be one little thing

that we can connect and share on…Let them see that you care, that you love them. If they

don't feel that love, they're not going to be welcomed by you. They're going to reject

you. They're not going to perceive anything I'm teaching them if I don't show I have

some kind of care or love for them.

During the focus group interview, Bob conveyed,

For me, it's getting to know them because they're smart. You can't just throw them some

candy and then expect them to like you. You can't always play some hip-hop and expect

them to like you…You have to get to know them. Once they see that you're sincere…and

you generally are invested in trying to get to know them…they see that you care, then

they will buy into the future that you are preparing them for…They see, Oh, I see why

you're doing this…you really care about it because you care about me. That's what I

experienced.

Ally, Brandy, Reese, and Mary expressed meaningful statements about building

relationships with their at-risk students. Ally said, "I find out about who they are…they all have

a story." Brandy said, "In building relationships…I keep an environment where students know

they can trust me." Reese added, "My relationships with my students is all about building, and

being honest, consistent, and fair." Mary exclaimed,

To get a better relationship with students, I find out their interests. I give students what

they need…some need a mentor more than a teacher, some need me to just teach, and

some need me to be a mom plus a teacher.

The teachers showed a personal interest in their students, found ways to relate to their students,

and met their students' needs. This seemed to help the students recognize that the teachers truly

cared for them and willing to do what was necessary to build relationships with them. It also

helped both the teacher and student recognize the value in building and maintaining the relationship.

Sub-Question 2: How does modeling an ethic of care impact teachers' relationships with at-risk students?

Each of the participants in this research was strategic and incessant in modeling an ethic of care to their students. Modeling care helped the teachers to form positive relationships with their students. When teachers showed that they cared, students were able to connect to the teachers and the school. Candi affirmed, "I just am very caring…I think it helps them to want to do better, to want to do good, and to understand that somebody loves and cares about them…They want to come to school because they have somebody that cares about them."

Both Candi and Sue described the care as "genuine." As the teachers modeled care, their at-risk students opened up to them and began to trust them, because they recognized that the teachers' care was authentic. The teachers did not mind being vulnerable and they were willing to set themselves aside in order to meet the needs of the students. Both Brandy and Dean talked about making mistakes around their students. Brandy attested, "I find out about them. I reveal myself. I let them see me make mistakes." Dean said,

> Some days – I'll be honest with you – you don't feel like coming in there and dealing
> with it. So, that at-risk student, even though I love them to death, sometimes they may
> take you to that extreme. So, I have to go in and I might go hard on them at that particular
> moment. Sometimes, it may be unfair for them, but at the same time, I let them know I'm
> human. If I felt like I went too hard on somebody, I always go back and I apologize. I
> think that's important to, again, establish that bond, you're continuing that bond, so they
> can see that you make mistakes. Yeah, I make mistakes.

Although modeling care was challenging and caused the teachers to have to be vulnerable at times, the teachers were persistent in showing care because they knew it was a big part of being able to form positive relationships with their at-risk students. Ann stated,

> A lot of these kids have a lot of baggage, and that baggage is basically why they are the way they are. You have to open them – like a suitcase – you have to open it up. And eventually they'll open up to you, and you'll learn something.

Teachers also recognized that within modeling an ethic of care, they had to change their own practices in order to meet the needs of the students. Ellie, Bre, and Andy admitted to adjusting how they did things in the classroom in order to connect to their at-risk students. In the photo narrative responses, both Ellie and Bre revealed images of their classroom, which showed how flexible seating met the needs of their at-risk students and gave students a home away from home. In her photo narrative, Bre wrote,

> This school year I have made the transition into flexible seating. My classroom has always had the bright and "homey" feel to it, but just having color and quotes on the wall wasn't enough for me or my students. I wanted my classroom to feel comfortable and inviting. Throughout the years, I have seen students who like to stand up to complete work, sit on top of tables, or lay on the floor… I wanted my classroom to represent a flexible environment that met the needs to the students in our classroom.

In his photo narrative, Andy disclosed,

> Too often, it is easy to separate an at-risk student from the rest of the class in the hopes of creating a distraction-free learning environment. The question is – what about the isolated student? My goal is to keep these desks vacant in order to provide every student with the quality education he or she needs to succeed in the future.

The participants had to reflect on their practices and find ways to address the needs of each of their students. They recognized that teaching needed to look a little different for their at-risk students. They were willing to show care by any means necessary because they were determined to make connections with their students.

Sub-Question 3: When modeling an ethic of care, what do teachers perceive as the specific behaviors that help create a sense of security or belonging for at-risk students?

The data revealed what the teachers perceived as the specific behaviors they demonstrated that created a sense of security and belonging for their at-risk students. The CAS questionnaire showed that 80% of the participants had a high practice as a carer in their classrooms. The model of care that the teachers gave was unceasing and helped the at-risk students feel more secure when they were in school. Lenny stated,

> Once they come in, I'm able to give them time enough to calm themselves down, to create a positive environment for them, a safe environment for them, I'm able to talk with them, so when they leave my class, they're able to be successful in their regular environment.

Brandy maintained,

> That goes back to what we were talking about earlier about relationships because some that can't – that really can't – will try for you. But at the same time, you have to let them know, "I need you to do this." That's part of creating an environment where children feel safe to fail.

It was clear that the environment that the teacher created was a big part of helping them create a sense of security or belonging for the students. Creating this environment meant that teachers had to make connections, show care, and sometimes change their teaching practices. Candi and

Ellie cited similar statements about creating a caring environment for students. Candi said, "I just create an atmosphere that's conducive to love and learning to make them feel welcome and wanted." Ellie added, "A lot of the troubled at-risk students, they find refuge in my classroom, so I try to make it as welcoming an environment as possible. Even on their worst day, I try to make them feel their best." Ellie also wrote the following in her photo narrative:

> Forming a positive relationship with students in my 6th grade English class can be seen through the positive instructional climate that I provide on a daily basis. Such positive instructional climate is provided through the use of flexible seating within the classroom. Students are allowed to freely and safely sit in flexible seating areas where they are afforded the opportunity to complete their work in a comfortable seating area…This non-traditional setting helps to prepare students for real-world working situations…Students take pride in their "home away from home".

Taking a personal interest, communication, and giving the student attention and recognition were also behaviors that helped at-risk students feel a sense of belonging. Several of the participants spoke about taking on a parental role and ensuring students were recognized through greetings, compliments, and encouragement. During the focus group interview, Candi, Lenny, and Ellie discussed how they recognized their at-risk students. Candi said, "I think the kid's acknowledgment, just "I see you." You're seen. You're not forgotten. You are a part because you know middle school, they want to be a part of something." Lenny said, "I feel a couple of ways I model caring. I remember their birthday, celebrate awards if they get something."

Additionally, Ellie said,

> I try to begin each day by offering some type of positivity. All the students are coming to school with their own issues and their own personal agendas. Like everyone else, I try to make sure that I foster or pay some type of attention to them.

When the teachers demonstrated these specific behaviors of creating a welcoming environment, taking a personal interest in their students, recognizing their students, and communicating with their students, the students responded in a positive manner. This connection and interaction allowed the teachers to form positive relationships with their students.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in middle school in the southeast. Fifteen teachers from various content areas and with varying years of experience participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews, photo narratives, a focus group interview, and a questionnaire were used to obtain data for this study.

The researcher focused on capturing the lived experiences of the participants. Data from the research was organized into three major themes: Relentless Efforts to Care, Selfless Connections, and Maturing Teacher Practices. Within the framework of the research questions, each identified theme was revealed in the individual interviews, focus group interview, and photo narratives. Additionally, the results of the CAS questionnaire confirmed the teachers as having average to high practices as a carer. The study indicated that middle school teachers' experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools were more than just showing up to teach. Middle school teachers understood that making connections, showing care, and showing growth in their teaching practices were important in order to reach

their students. Although there were challenges, the value of the relationship was important, and

in order to form the relationships, the teachers would need to ensure that they met the expressed

needs of the students. The needs of the students came first.

This chapter depicts a composite of the teachers' experiences. Details of the findings and

data analysis have been shared to help better understand the phenomenon of forming positive

relationships with at-risk students. All of the participants shared common descriptions of how

they were able to form these positive relationships.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students at Title I middle schools in the southeast. A total of 26 potential participants were selected by principals because they met the criteria for the study; however, only 15 agreed to participate. The participants in the study were from varying backgrounds and possessed different characteristics concerning age, ethnicity, content specifics, grade levels taught, and the number of years in education. Of the participants, 15 completed individual interviews and a questionnaire, 11 completed photo narratives, and 6 completed a focus group interview. All the data was analyzed using phenomenological reductionism (Moustakas, 1994). This chapter begins with a summary of the findings as related to the three identified themes, relevant literature, and Nodding's (1984) ethic of care theory which guided this study. Implications of the research are described, followed by a discussion of limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Through the analysis of participant interviews, questionnaires, photo narratives, and a focus group interview, three themes were identified regarding how teachers' described their experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students: Relentless Efforts to Care, Selfless Connections, and Maturing Teacher Practices. Although the participants were from varying backgrounds, different schools, and offered different experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students, similarities emerged from the data that spoke to the essence of their experiences. Additionally, the research questions guiding this study were grounded in Nodding's (1984) ethic of care theory.

The central research question for this study was, *How do teachers describe their experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools?* For the purposes of this study, the term *positive relationships* was defined as teachers' demonstration of caring in their daily practices (Noddings, 2010). All participants shared unique experiences of how they were able to form positive relationships with at-risk students during their years of teaching. From the analysis of all data sets, three themes emerged that enabled the researcher to address the central question and the three sub-questions. The three themes that emerged: Relentless Efforts to Care, Selfless Connections, and Maturing Teacher Practices portrayed the overall experiences of how teachers formed positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools.

Noddings (1992) stated that caring is a way of being in relation, wherein the one caring makes the needs of the cared-for a priority. The teachers were committed to giving care to their students and meeting the immediate needs of their students. They were unyielding in their efforts to form positive relationships with at-risk students despite the chances of being rejected by the students. One participant, Ashe, noted that there were always going to be students that no matter what you did to help them, they would reject the help, but the key was to keep trying to build that relationship. The participants understood the importance of building relationships with at-risk students, and they were faithful to giving care and meeting the needs of the students. Additionally, they took on the approach that, "Every day was a new day," and they came to work each day with new expectations, and the decision to care no matter what because forming positive relationships with their at-risk students was important to them as teachers. Reese, Ellie, and Sue mentioned that every day was a new day and that they came in with new expectations each day.

The first sub-question for the study was, *What perceptions do teachers have about the factors that contribute to building and maintaining positive relationships with at-risk students?* Again, this question was revealed in the three themes that emerged from this study. According to research, supportive and positive student-teacher relationships are especially important, beneficial, and contribute to positive outcomes for students at risk of school failure (Anderson et al., 2011; Roorda et al., 2011, Myers & Pianta, 2008). For the participants in this study, making connections with students was a major factor in being able to build and maintain relationships with at-risk students. The connections enabled the teachers to have a positive effect on their at-risk students. The teachers had to get to know their students, commit themselves to continuous efforts to care, ensure students' expressed needs were met, and adapt teaching practices to form these connections. A study by Keifer et al. (2014) found that getting to know students, caring for students, and connecting with students helped teachers to meet students' needs and form positive relationships with students. Many of the participants discussed taking a personal interest in the students and being relatable as factors that contributed to making connections and building their relationships with at-risk students. Andy, Bob, Lenny, Mary, Reese, and Sue all spoke about getting to know students' interests through conversations or interest surveys and connecting to students' interests through lesson plans or other communication.

The second and third sub-questions for this research dealt specifically with teachers modeling an ethic of care. The questions addressed how modeling an ethic of care impacted teachers' relationships with at-risk students and teachers' perceptions of specific behaviors that created a sense of security of belonging for at-risk students due to modeling an ethic of care. Once more, these research questions were unveiled throughout the three themes identified in this research. In an ethic of care, educators abandon their judgments in order to promote the growth

and development of students as people (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). Modeling an ethic of care meant that teachers were incessant in their efforts to care, compassionate and self-denying when making connections, and reflective of their teaching practices in order to secure relationships with their at-risk students.

The care that the teachers gave impacted the teachers' relationships with at-risk students by helping the teachers form positive relationships and helping students make connections with their teachers and the school. When teachers demonstrate caring and meet students' needs by being relational and creating positive relationships, students feel a sense of belonging to the classroom and the teacher (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Hanna, 2014). The teachers realized that the care they gave had to be genuine and authentic because this helped the at-risk students open up to them and begin to trust them. When this began to happen, students also felt a sense of belonging and security with the teachers.

The participants shared that modeling an ethic of care through creating a welcoming environment contributed to the at-risk students' feelings of security and belonging. Ally and Ellie created classroom environments conducive to love and learning to make students feel welcome and wanted. Bre listened to students over the years and changed her classroom to represent a flexible environment that met the needs of the students. Brandy explained that it was important to create an environment where students felt safe to fail. These classroom environments showed the teachers efforts in modeling an ethic of care and created a space where at-risk students felt safe and secure and allowed them to let their guards down in order to connect with their teachers to form positive relationships.

Discussion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools in the southeast. The study's findings highlight the importance of teachers' behaviors in forming positive relationships with at-risk students. Nodding's (1984) ethic of care theory served as the theoretical framework for this study.

Theoretical

Nodding's (1984, 1992) ethic of care theory centers around the construct that within an ethic of care, a relationship is developed in which one individual takes on the role of the one caring and the other is the one being cared for. Noddings (1992) describes caring as a way of being in relation and describes a caring relationship as a connection between two people. The participants in this study felt that forming connections with their students was their first priority because these connections were needed in order to reach their students on an academic or emotional level. Andy noted that he uses whatever tools necessary to connect with the students first and then teach them second. Bre, Bob, Ally, and Lenny also noted the importance of forming a connection with students before trying to teach them or give them directives. The participants recognized that when working with at-risk students, teaching and learning could not take place until a connection was made.

Nodding's (1984) description of caring characteristics is an act of engrossment and motivational displacement. Within engrossment, the caregiver has an interest in the one being cared-for and chooses to empty himself of his own interests to receive another's interest; and within motivational displacement, the caregiver makes the needs of the one being cared-for a priority (Kim & Schallert, 2011; Noddings, 1984, 1992). The caregiver brackets out self-

interests and becomes open to the needs and interests of the one being cared-for (Nelson, 2013).

The participants in this study consistently put their students' needs above their own. They often

set aside their own feelings and overlooked the challenges of working with at-risk students in

order to experience the success of forming positive relationships with their students. Ally, Ann,

Bre, Keema, Reese, and Sue discussed that there were different needs for each student and that

teachers had to be willing to do whatever it takes to meet the needs of the students. Ashe added

that teaching is about the students' needs, and not the teachers. In an ethic of care, educators

abandon their judgments in order to promote the growth and development of students as people

(Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984).

This research study contains several examples of participants' stories that support the

theoretical perspective on the role of an ethic of care in forming positive relationships with

students. Participants' unique stories highlight the importance of caring and attending to the

expressed needs of the students above all else. Several teachers relied on their efforts of care and

selfless connections to build and maintain relationships with their students. From their

experiences, an ethic of care served as a catalyst for forming positive relationships with at-risk

students.

Empirical

Much of the current literature highlights the importance of teacher-student relationships.

Keifer et al. (2014) found that knowing students, caring for students, and connecting with

students helped teachers meet the developmental needs of students, build positive relationships,

and maximize academic motivation of students. Responsive teaching occurs when the

relationship between student and teacher is based on care and connectivity (Kim & Schallert,

2011; Kiefer et al., 2014; Noddings, 1992; Roorda et al., 2011). The participants in this study

understood that connecting with their students and meeting their needs made room for building

positive relationships and increasing students' academic, social, and emotional success.

Students described their relationships with teachers in a study by McHugh et al. (2013) as

bridges in which teachers formed connections with students or barriers in which teachers were

inattentive or failed to form connections with students. Students' experiences and interactions

with their teachers' behaviors gives students the opportunity to make generalizations about

student-teacher relationships. Caring behaviors towards students has been recognized as

promoting a sense of belonging, establishing connections through personal knowledge of

students, supporting academic success, and addressing physiological needs (Garza, Ovando, &

Seymour, 2010; Garza et al., 2014; Knoell et al., 2015). The participants disclosed that creating

a positive classroom environment helped promote a sense of security and belonging for their

students. Brandy stressed the importance of creating a classroom environment where students

feel safe to fail. Other participants, Ally, Andy, Bre, Candi, and Ellie revealed that learning to

center their classroom environment on the students' needs attributed to how they grew in their

teaching practices. The participants also admitted that getting to know their students personally

and taking on a parental role helped them to build and maintain relationships with their students.

While, this study confirms previous research that teachers must serve as nurturers, create

a positive classroom environment, foster a sense of security and belonging, and get to know

students personally in order to form positive relationships with them, this study also extends on

previous research by bringing forth the voice of the teachers. This research reveals the

challenges, changes, and hardships teachers often endure as they build and maintain positive

relationships with at-risk students. Teachers may be challenged to demonstrate caring behaviors

responsive to the needs of students, particularly when teacher experiences and perceptions

sometimes hinder caring for students with ethnically and culturally unique backgrounds (Garza et al., 2014). Andy, Bre, Candi, Dean, shared that although building relationships with at-risk students was challenging and sometimes frustrating, it was important to differentiate for those students and to keep trying to build positive relationships even when the students rejected or hurt the teacher. Ellie mentioned that although working with at-risk students can be draining and challenging, each day of teaching came with new expectations.

This study also revealed the vulnerability teachers must embrace in order to form positive relationships with at-risk students. Frelin (2015) argues that teachers must employ strategies to help negotiate the trust of students when students have learned to mistrust adults. The participants in this study were able to connect to students by being genuine and exposing their true selves. Brandy indicated that she gets to know her students, reveals herself, and lets the students see her make mistakes. Dean testified that he didn't always want to come into work and deal with his at-risk students, however, because of the love he had for them, he was able to establish bonds with students and help them understand that he as a teacher also made mistakes. This vulnerability within the teachers helped students to see them differently and established a connection towards a relationship amongst the student and teacher. As students begin to trust teachers in a caring relationship between student and teacher, a bridge is formed to help troubled or struggling students (Frelin, 2015). The participants in this study gave insight on the extent of care teachers must give in order to form positive relationships with at-risk students. The teachers who are able to form these relationships give care that goes beyond the surface of just showing up to teach each day.

Implications

The findings in this transcendental phenomenological study have implications for teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders in the educational community. This section discusses the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications derived from the research.

Theoretical

This study uses Nodding's (1984) ethic of care theory as a lens to examine how teachers describe their experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools. Nodding's (1984, 1992) ethic of care theory suggests that within an ethic of care, a relationship is developed in which one individual takes on the role of the one caring and the other is the one being cared for. When teachers show that they care, their own needs are often aborted to focus on the expressed needs of the children they serve (Noddings, 2012a). This study revealed that teachers who show an ethic of care develop positive relationships with students because they focus on the needs of the students above all else. Participants shared that they connect with students first and then teach them second. This study also revealed that when teachers show an ethic of care, they are sometimes faced with other trials to include the continuous commitment of efforts to care despite rejection, self-sacrificing of their own needs and vulnerability, and adapting and adjusting of teaching practices.

This study extends on Nel Nodding's ethic of care theory by showing how a nature of care influences teachers' ability to form positive relationships with at-risk students. Noddings (1992) describes caring as a way of being in relation and describes a caring relationship as a connection between two people. Each participant in this study had his or her own unique experiences, yet, each of them connected with their students and created a caring relationship by being genuine, nurturing, and choosing to focus on students' needs. Teachers can benefit from

this information as they reflect and look at behaviors needed to form connections with at-risk students. Additionally, administrators can utilize this information to help guide teachers and provide professional development which assists teachers in focusing on the students' expressed needs before learning can take place.

Empirical

This study adds to the current literature underscoring the importance of student-teacher relationships. When teachers are able to show caring and meet students ' needs by being relational, students may feel a sense of belonging to the classroom and the teacher that helps create a positive relationship (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Hanna, 2014). The participants in the study were able to form positive relationships with at-risk students by displaying relentless efforts of care, portraying selfless connections, and adjusting teaching practices. Teachers establish caring connections when they can build supportive student-teacher relationships (Ellerbock et al., 2014; Kim & Schallert, 2011). These relationships are characterized by the way the teacher interacts in the classroom with the students. The participants in this study were honest and open towards students, they often took on parental roles, and they showed a personal interest in students.

With the participants in this study, "caring" was not just a word they used, but "caring" was embedded in their everyday practices. It is not enough for teachers to just tell students that they care but, "caring teachers listen and respond differently to their students" (Noddings, 1992, p. 19). Caring teachers recognize that each student is different and they respond to their students according to their needs. The participants in this study recognized that differentiation was needed in order to form relationships with their at-risk students. They could not do business as usual because these students needed something different. The participants explained that each

student was different and had a different story; also, that differentiation was not only needed in the learning, but also in the manner in which students were treated. Administrators, teachers, and other educational stakeholders can benefit from this information but understanding that a one size fits all mentality will not work for students who are already at risk for learning. At-risk students will need a different level of support or caring than students who are not at-risk or disengaged from the learning process. This information will guide teachers and administrators in developing the appropriate supports to aid in the learning process of at-risk students.

Practical

Participants reported having to be committed to giving students care even when they were rejected, having to set their own needs and feelings aside to meet the needs of the students, and having to adjust teaching practices for their at-risk students. These were all challenges the participants faced as they made connections with their students. In order to connect with students, educators must understand the behaviors necessary. When teachers care for their students, they welcome them, show respect for their students, and listen and take time to understand the needs of the students (Jeffrey, Auger, Pepperell, 2013). Caring teachers listen to students, give compliments, and are welcoming. In addition, they respect student input and take time to understand student needs (Jeffrey et al., 2013).

The interactions and connections that teachers form with at-risk students, provides insight on reducing student dropout rates for those students who choose to leave school because they lack meaningful relationships with teachers. This study speaks to the behaviors and efforts of care that teachers, administrators, and other educational stakeholders must give in order to meet the needs of at-risk students. It is necessary to create school and classroom environments that

welcome students despite their challenges in order to form relationships and keep students connected to learning.

Delimitations and Limitations

The researcher implemented several delimitations to guide this research. The study included teachers with 3 or more years of experience of teaching in a Title I middle school who were identified by an administrator or an instructional coach as a teacher who had been able to form positive relationships with at-risk students. This helped the researcher ensure that all participants had experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), and allowed the researcher to target schools that were identified in serving at-risk students.

There were also limitations to this study. Using a small, purposeful-criterion sample provided an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of a small group of individuals, however the small number of participants and geographic location limits generalizing to other populations (Creswell, 2013). The study included 15 participants who represented all of the core content areas in middle grades 6-8 and a variety of years in teaching experience. However, other teachers in the same grade levels with the same experiences may have given different perspectives on how they form positive relationships with at-risk students. Additionally, because this study focused on middle school teachers, elementary or secondary teachers may provide a different perspective.

Other limitations included researcher bias. As a result of the researcher's experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students, preconceived judgments might have occurred. To offset any preconceived notions, the researcher embraced the Epoche, or bracketing of experiences (Moustakas, 1994) in order to share the lived experiences of the participants in the study. Finally, only 11 of the 15 participants completed all sets of data

collection in this study. While data saturation was met, the missing data may have inadvertently eliminated a potential discovery.

Recommendations for Future Research

The intent of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools. Even though this study focused on middle school teachers in one school district located in the southeast, further research may target other educational levels such as elementary or high school in other geographic regions or districts. The description of how the relationships are formed may vary depending on teachers' content, level, or teaching style, thus, teachers in elementary or high school may have different experiences.

Further phenomenological studies should examine at-risk students' perceptions of how positive relationships are formed with their teachers. This research may give insight into the challenges students face when forming these relationships. Hearing from the students' perspectives may provide other dimensions to the findings of this study. Additional research findings could result in changes to teacher-student class assignments and the implementation of mentoring programs for teachers and students.

Interviews with school leaders were not included in this study. This study could be replicated with school leaders to understand their perceptions regarding their role in helping teachers form positive relationships with at-risk students. The findings in this study implicate that school leaders may take a distant approach to assist teachers in their efforts to form these relationships. School leaders may be more reserved in their approach to the importance of teachers forming these relationships. Also, their expectation is that teachers should form these

positive relationships without intentional training. Further research may bring to light the importance of school leaders' roles in helping teachers make connections with at-risk students.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools. This study, focused on the lived experiences of middle school teachers, was necessary to add to existing literature which highlights the importance of student-teacher relationships. The central research question used to examine the shared experiences of the teachers was: How do teachers describe their experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools? The sub-questions focused on factors that contribute to maintaining and building positive relationships with at-risk students, how modeling an ethic of care impacted teachers' relationships with at-risk students, and teachers' perceptions of specific behaviors that created a sense of security of belonging for at-risk students. Results from analysis of the data identified three themes: Relentless Efforts to Care, Selfless Connections, and Maturing Teacher Practices.

Participants acknowledged that they were committed to giving care to their students despite the chances of being rejected by the students. They understood the importance of building relationships with at-risk students, and they were committed to giving care and meeting the needs of the students. Ultimately, modeling an ethic of care meant that teachers were constant in their efforts to care, compassionate and selfless in making connections, and reflective of their teaching practices.

Although this study extended on existing research, the qualitative design of the study limited the ability to generalize the results. Future research should focus on other educational levels, geographic regions, or districts; as well as perspectives of students and school leaders.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS WHO FORM POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH

AT-RISK STUDENTS IN TITLE I MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN THE SOUTHEAST

Natasha Brown
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study that is seeking to describe the experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I Middle Schools in a southeastern school district. You were selected as a possible participant because you:

- Work in a Title I middle school
- Have been employed in a Title I middle school for 3 or more years
- Have been identified by an administrator or instructional leader as a teacher who:
    - Creates a positive classroom environment, has a good rapport with students, and forms positive relationships with students as evidenced by performing Proficient or Above on Teacher Evaluations
    - Has high levels of student academic achievement as evidenced by meeting or exceeding student academic growth in assessment data

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

My name is Natasha Brown, a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, and I will be conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of teachers who form positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools in a southeastern school district. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

Central Question
How do teachers describe their experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students in Title I middle schools?
Sub-question 1
What perceptions do teachers have about the factors that contribute to building and maintaining positive relationships with at-risk students?
Sub-question 2
How does modeling an ethic of care impact teachers' relationships with at-risk students?
Sub-question 3
When modeling of an ethic of care, what do teachers perceive as the specific behaviors that help create a sense of security or belonging for at-risk students?

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in a face to face interview which will be audio/video recorded. The interview should take no more than 45 minutes.
2. Take a brief questionnaire, consisting of 20 questions. The questionnaire should take no more than 15 minutes.
3. Complete a photo narrative displaying your overall experiences in forming positive relationships with at-risk students. You will provide a digital image and include a short narrative with the digital image that will further clarify your perspective of being able to form these relationships. Instructions will be provided at the conclusion of the interview session and you will have 1 week to return it to the researcher.
4. Participate in a face to face focus group session with other participants of the study. This focus group session will take between 60-90 minutes. This interview session will be audio/video recorded.
5. Review interview tra nscriptions with the researcher to validate that the written transcription is what was said during this interview. This will occur between 2-3 weeks following interview sessions.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include that this study may help improve teaching practices in an often overlooked area of the importance of forming positive relationships with students. In taking a deeper look at student-teacher relationships, school administrators may gain a better understanding of how to help teachers who struggle to form positive relationship with students. Additionally, following research, paraprofessionals may have a greater understanding of their role in forming positive relationships with students as they assist teachers in the classroom. Through this study, educators may gain a better understanding of the role an ethic of caring plays in forming relationships with students. The information gained from this study may inform professional development for educators on how to form connections with students, especially at-risk students. The interactions and connections that teachers form with at-risk students, provides insight on reducing student dropout rates for those students who choose to leave school because they lack meaningful relationships with teachers.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym for this study. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Focus Group interviews will also be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your school. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Natasha Brown. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at 757-537-7445 and/or nbrown6@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. James Zabloski, at jlzabloski@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Signature of Investigator   Date

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Grade Level/Subject	Years of Experience
Ally	46	Female	African-American	8th-Science	9
Andy	48	Male	Caucasian	6th-Social Studies	7
Ann	67	Female	African-American	7th-Science	12
Ashe	27	Female	Caucasian	7th-Math	5
Brandy	48	Female	African-American	6th-English/Language Arts and Social Studies	10
Bre	27	Female	Caucasian	8th-Math and Science	6
Bob	30	Male	African-American	7th-English/Language Arts	7
Candi	61	Female	African-American	6th-8th-English, Math, Science, Social Studies	20
Dean	41	Male	African-American	8th-Social Studies	18
Ellie	35	Female	African-American	6th-English/Language Arts	6
Keema	52	Female	African-American	6th-Math and Science	9
Lenny	42	Male	African-American	6th-8th PE/ISS	20
Mary	34	Female	African-American	7th-Social Studies	12
Reese	44	Female	African-American	8th-Science	20
Sue	55	Female	African-American	7th-English/Language Arts	14

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE PERMISSION TO USE

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APPENDIX D: QUESTIONNAIRE

Nyberg Caring Assessment Scale (CAS)
Are these caring attributes things you actually use in your day-to-day practice?

Do you:	Does not use in practice	Occasionally use in practice	Sometimes use in practice	Often use in practice	Always use in practice
1. Have a deep respect for the needs of others.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Not give up hope for others.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Remain sensitive to the needs of others.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Communicate a helping, trusting attitude toward others.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Express positive and negative feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Solve problems creatively.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Understand that spiritual forces contribute to human care.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Consider relationships before rules.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Base decisions on what is best for the people involved.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Understand thoroughly what situations mean to people.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Go beyond the superficial to know people well.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Implement skills and techniques well.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Choose tactics that will accomplish goals.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Give full consideration to situational factors.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Focus on helping others to grow.	1	2	3	4	5
16. Take time for personal needs and growth.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Allow time for caring opportunities.	1	2	3	4	5
18. Remain committed to a continuing relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
19. Listen carefully and be open to feedback.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Believe that others have a potential that can be achieved.	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX E: QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

	Ally	Andy	Ann	Ashe	Brandy	Bob	Bre	Candi	Dean	Ellie	Keema	Lenny	Mary	Reese	Sue	Question Average
1. Have a deep respect for the needs of others.	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	4.64
2. Not give up hope for others.	5	5	5	3	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	4.50
3. Remain sensitive to the needs of others.	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	3	4	4.43
4. Communicate a helping, trusting attitude toward others.	5	5	4	4	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	3	4	4.43
5. Express positive and negative feelings.	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	4.64
6. Solve problems creatively.	5	5	3	4	5	5	5	4	4	5	4	3	4	4	3	4.14
7. Understand that spiritual forces contribute to human care.	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	3	5	5	5	4.71
8. Consider relationships before rules.	5	5	1	3	4	4	5	4	5	5	5	3	5	3	3	3.93
9. Base decisions on what is best of the people involved.	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	5	3	4	4.57
10. Understand thoroughly what situations mean to people.	5	5	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	4.36
11. Go beyond the superficial to know people well.	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	4	2	5	4	3	4.29
12. Implement skills and techniques well.	4	5	3	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	4.21
13. Choose tactics that will accomplish goals.	4	5	4	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	4.36
14. Give full consideration to situational factors.	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	4	4	4	4	5	3	3	4.29
15. Focus on helping others to grow.	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	4.71
16. Take time for personal needs and growth.	4	5	2	5	5	3	4	4	5	4	3	4	5	4	4	4.07
17. Allow time for caring opportunities.	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	4	3	4	5	4	4	4.36
18. Remain committed to a continuing relationship.	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	5	5	4	3	5	4	4	4.43
19. Listen carefully and be open to feedback.	5	5	4	4	5	4	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	3	4	4.36
20. Believe that others have a potential that can be achieved.	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4.86
Participant Average	4.85	5.00	4.20	4.25	4.85	4.30	4.60	4.60	4.60	4.70	4.25	3.90	4.90	3.80	3.85	

APPENDIX F: THEME DEVELOPMENT

THEMES	RELATED CODES
Theme 1: Relentless Efforts to Care	• Advocate • Care • Challenges • Commitment • Consistency • Determination • Firm • Frustration • Genuine • Honesty • Influence • Mentoring • Motivation • Non-Responsive Students • Nurturing • Optimistic • Overwhelming • Parental Role • Patience • Perseverance • Positive Outlook • Purposeful
Theme 2: Selfless Connections	• At-Risk Students • Attention • Compassion • Connections • Empathy • Encouragement • Familiarity • Grace • Guilt • Intentional • Love • Meaningful • Model • Needs • One on One • Personal Interests • Rejection

- Relatable
- Relationships with students
- Responsibilities
- Secure
- Support
- Time
- Trust
- Understanding
- Worry

Theme 3: Maturing Teacher Practices

- Accountability
- Adaptability
- Adjusting
- Communication
- Compromise
- Differentiation
- Educational Maturity
- Environment
- Expectations
- Experiences
- Flexibility
- Humor
- Incentives
- Involvement
- Life Skills
- Planning
- Preparation
- Reflection
- Routine
- Structure
- Welcoming

APPENDIX G: PHOTO NARRATIVE INSTRUCTIONS

Photo Narrative Instructions

Directions: Utilizing your Smart device, please take 1-2 photos that illustrate your overall experiences in forming positive relationships with at-risk students or attach existing photos that allow you to define yourself as a teacher who has demonstrated success in forming positive relationships with at-risk students. Afterwards, upload your photos into a blank word document. Beneath the photo(s), please write a brief description in narrative form, explaining the relationship between the digital image and your lived experiences of forming positive relationships with at-risk students. The photo(s) and their narratives should provide a deeper understanding of your experiences and allow your voice to be heard. **Please do not include actual photos of students.**

Upon completing the photo narrative, please return it to the researcher via email @ nbrown6@liberty.edu within 1 week.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

APPENDIX H: PHOTO NARRATIVE SAMPLE (MARY)

A plant is best able to grow if it has access to water and sunshine in most cases. This also best illustrates my overall experiences with building positive relationships with at-risk students. Sometimes the care and attention I give works to make the students grow into the best versions of themselves in spite of their environment and other times it may not have an impact at all because the home environment has a higher amount of control over their outcome. This is like those circumstances where there is an insurmountable amount of darkness in the area and the vegetation suffers or where acid rain is consistently pelting down over the area. Over my time as a teacher of at-risk students, I have seen many flowers (students) bloom and go on to do great things and I have also the opposite happen as well to students that could have done well if not for bad decisions. If anything as a teacher my job is not only to teach and build relationships, but also to help create productive citizens.

APPENDIX I: REFLECTIVE JOURNAL EXCERPT

October 23, 2018, 3:30 p.m.

I just met with Andy (pseudonym) for an individual interview. When I arrived, I had to wait in the office because he was in a parent meeting. When he came to get me from the office, I wondered what the interview would be like because Andy did not look like the teachers I knew that normally had positive relationships with at-risk students, rather, he looked like the teachers who in my experiences often had problems relating to at-risk students. As we walked to the classroom, I quickly reminded myself that Andy was recommended for the study because he met the criteria and also that my role for the day was to set aside any prejudgments and to simply hear Andy's story and understand his experiences.

Before beginning the interview, Andy explained that he loved to talk and I told him that was a good thing. Andy seemed very comfortable and relaxed. During the interview, he was very open about his experiences both in the military and as a classroom teacher. I am happy that I was able to set aside my initial thoughts about Andy because the interview was interesting and I enjoyed listening to Andy. I know that as I progress in the interview process, I have to be mindful about prejudgments of participants.