THE ROLE OF AN ETHIC OF CARE IN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND THE
DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS:
A CASE STUDY OF AN URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of Educational Leadership, Sport Studies, & Educational/Counseling Psychology

MAY 2014

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of **BRENDA R. MCDONALD** find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

_Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value._

_Albert Einstein_

This journey has been life altering for me. When I began this work I had no idea that it would change the way I think about education and the purpose for my own life. I am grateful to those who stood beside me, encouraged me to find myself, and supported the completion of this critical chapter in my life.

I am blessed with family who has always encouraged me to set goals and go after them. I was raised to be a strong, independent woman only because I had two grandmothers who modeled tenacity, grit, and self-determination. My mother has stood beside me in this work, frequently asking how it was going, and encouraging me to keep pushing through the challenges. My father, a long-time public educator, has always been someone I admired. After 53 years of arduous work trying to close the achievement gap, he is just as passionate about it as the day he started. Thank you to my step-father and step-mother who provided encouragement and belief in me.

This work would not have been possible without my partner, Brian Via. He endured my frustration and supported me despite the time it took away from things we love to do. In many ways, it was his story and work that inspired me to look beyond what I thought I knew about educational leadership. I am also grateful to the Via family who always helped me find time to laugh and enjoy the moment in the middle of this work.

This dissertation is complete because of the support and encouragement of my initial chair, Dr. Chad Lochmiller and committee members Dr. Michelle Acker-Hocevar and Dr. Joan Kingrey. Chad’s guidance and advice pushed my thinking and broadened my perspective. Michelle has served as inspiration for writing about educational leadership from a perspective we
frequently do not acknowledge. Joan encouraged me to start and finish this process. Her words of encouragement and belief in the importance of my findings got me to the finish line. I will forever be indebted to this team’s leadership for sticking with me and letting me take the time I needed to have this work bring meaning to my own life and the life of my students.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the support of the participants in this study. They are courageous educators who have the very best intentions for our students and I would be proud to have any of them work with me again.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the role students had in this work. It has been such an honor to hear the stories of young people in our schools. Their own individual journeys have significantly impacted the way I think about education and the schools our children need. I have come to trust student voice as a powerful tool for constructing school cultures and believe it is one of the most essential ingredients in a great school.

This journey has led me to the next chapter in my life. It has caused me to take a great leap of faith and build a school that is different than our traditional schools. A school where student voice is elevated and adults recognize that it is a privilege to be part of a student’s life.
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Abstract

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Federal, state, and district mandates in the current era of accountability have narrowed middle school improvement efforts to a singular focus on academic excellence at the expense of student relationships and developmentally appropriate practices. This case study of ten middle school teachers serving an urban, underserved population draws from scholarship that strives for a reform framework employing an ethic of care. Data were collected to describe student perspectives about how teachers connect and build relationships, how teachers perceive they build student relationships and connections, and the role school administrators play in hindering or promoting the development of student-teacher relationships. The study documents the importance of the school leader in authorizing and supporting the development of student-teacher relationships. The study identified two manifestations of care in classroom teachers. One is an external motivation to support academic growth to raise achievement scores. The second is an internal motivation to support students in personal growth and development, including academic achievement. This study’s findings identify the need for a broader definition of instructional leadership to include an ethic of care, and a focus on student-relationships and student-connections as essential to improving student achievement.
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Dedication

For

Students the Education System Left Behind

“Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.”

Apple Inc.
Chapter 1

Introduction

The first day of school at Jefferson Middle School (pseudonym) arrives each August and with it come 650 eager seventh- and eighth-grade students and 50 dedicated, certificated teachers. Located in the second largest school district in the state, Jefferson Middle School (JJMS) is one of six middle schools in the district and one of two middle schools that receive Title I support. Approximately 85% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. JMS has experienced significant demographic changes. The school is currently the most diverse middle school in the city. Between the 2004-05 and 2010-11 school years, the population of White students decreased by 14% while the number of students who qualify for free/reduced lunch increased by 11%. The school has also seen an increase in the number of Hispanic and Pacific Islander students. These populations have increased by 4% and 6%, respectively. In the 2010-11 school year, one-fifth (20%) of students at JMS were Hispanic, multiracial, or Pacific Islander. This represents a significant change from prior years, when the school served predominantly low-income White students. Given the population it serves, JMS has a history of sporadic gains and declines in student achievement. Further, the school has long had a poor reputation related to school safety and academic quality.

As principal of JMS, I have come to understand that each student who attends our school has a story that impacts how he/she approaches school and life. As an educator, I feel my primary responsibility is to listen to these stories and integrate them into the educational experiences that I provide. As a building principal, however, I find that these stories often get drowned out by the calls for academic improvement amid the pressure of standards accountability. When you’re the principal of a Title I school like JMS, meeting adequate yearly
progress becomes an important measure of success. Your success or failure as a leader and as a school is measured by scores on state assessments. Your work as an instructional leader is judged by bar charts and graphs, and your staff is evaluated on the basis of the number of students who move from one standard to another. Although these measures provide evidence to inform leadership, they also serve as a distraction from individual students. No bar chart or graph can fully describe the stories that students carry with them to school each day.

The disconnect between external accountability and the work of improving schools is especially pronounced in middle schools, where your work includes equal parts instructional support and emotional development. In a given classroom on a given day, one student might love cartoons and stuffed animals while another is experimenting with alternative clothing and music. Some students are shaving while others barely stand four feet tall. For the adults working inside middle schools, these are the students we serve who populate the charts and graphs, whose stories we hear day in and day out, and whose success and failure depends on our ability as a school to keep students engaged during this turbulent time of life. This is the work that matters; yet it is also the work that is neglected in conversations about reform and improvement.

Consider one of the students who came to my office to ask for my help. His name was Max. He was a Native American student and was registered in accelerated courses in English and math. He knew they were not the right level for his ability, so he needed to have his schedule adjusted. When Max and I brought up his information on the computer, however, I realized the conversation was going to be more complicated than I had anticipated. Max had a story, and it was my job to listen. When I inquired how Max knew the courses were not the right level, he answered that his sixth grade teacher had him in the lowest reading and math groups.
She had told him that he was very far behind and probably would be in remedial courses in middle school. Max actually had test scores that were well above grade level. When I told Max I believed that he was very smart and would do well in the accelerated courses, he scrunched his face and stared at me right in the eyes and said, “You don’t even know me. How would you know that?”

I’m not sure I had a very good answer for Max, or for many of the students like him, other than explaining how we would help him learn how to study and ask good questions so he would be successful. When he asked why he should take the courses, I responded, “Well . . . these courses will prepare you well for the advanced course you will take in high school that best prepare you for college.” He responded by telling me that his father was in jail and his mother worked at the grocery store stocking shelves at night. He went on to tell me about his six siblings, all of whom were working two or three minimum-wage jobs to help pay the bills. He ended his story by explaining that no one had helped him at his elementary school. He perceived that teachers never came back to answer his questions. When the class went to the library the teachers would talk to other kids about books, but no one ever talked to him about books. He recalled that the librarian handed him a motocross magazine, explaining that he might be able to read it.

Rhea was another student I met. She wanted to take art and not music. Her request seemed like a simple fix. Talking with Rhea while I went about making the changes, I learned that she hated school. She spent more time in the office, she said, than in the classroom. Her teachers “hated” her. When I looked up her discipline record, it was a list longer than I had ever seen. Since it is not typical for elementary schools to list a lot of student discipline in a file, it made sense that Rhea felt picked on. Most of the entries were about disrespect, refusal, talking
back, and fighting. Rhea was one of two children in a single-parent home. Her mother spoke a little English and worked at a restaurant in the community. She had no idea who her father was; her mother’s boyfriend, however, was in and out of the tiny apartment. Rhea slept on the couch most nights, opting not to sleep with her little brother. As of late, however, Rhea told me that she had been sleeping on the floor in her little brother’s room because her mom was working nights and the boyfriend scared her. Rhea reported that during the previous year the school counselor had helped her come up with a plan to be a hairdresser so that she would not end up pregnant before she got out of high school. When Rhea left, I glanced at her test scores: They were in the top 5%.

**Unique Challenges and Different Needs of Middle Schools**

Research on the unique developmental needs of middle school students—like Max and Rhea—dates to the early 1980s (Hill, 1980, 1983; Lipsitz, 1984; Thornburg, 1980). The research suggests that middle school students require educational experiences that reflect their unique social, emotional, behavioral, and physical needs. Hill (1980), for example, proposed that middle school students experience a “complex development process” that involve three factors. First, he claimed, middle school students experience significant biological, psychological, and social-definition changes that represent the primary changes of early adolescence. His second claim was that students experience psycho-social changes that include issues related to attachment, autonomy, sexuality, intimacy, achievement, and identity. His third claim was that the context surrounding middle school children matters—particularly as it relates to their family, peer group, and school setting.
Lipsitz (1984) wrote in response to the early work of Hill and Thornburg that middle schools would need to be reformed in order to serve the developmental needs of early adolescents. She wrote that middle schools that are responsive to early adolescent needs reduce the size of focus groups . . . personalize the quality of adult-student relationships, give ample room for peer groups to flourish, acknowledge diverse areas of competence, involve students in participatory activities, emphasize self-exploration and physical activity . . . [and] win a clearly defined, structured environment. (p. 199)

To this end, the National Middle School Association advocated that middle schools must be an “educational response to the needs and characteristics of youngsters during early adolescence” (NMSA, 1982, p. 14).

In middle schools serving poor and minority students, this educational response must integrate and attend to other factors—such as the perception that students like Max and Rhea may or may not be equipped with the skills needed to be successful academically. Further, middle schools must include minority students’ cultures as well as socially marginalized parents within the context of invitational schools (Auerbach, 2009; Baker, 2005). These schools must transform communities into places where partnership is valued and actively pursued because such environments create substantial changes in student behavior, attendance, attitude, and motivation (Auerbach, 2009; Baker, 2005; Gu, Sammons, & Mehta, 2008). For disenfranchised students and families, such an environment provides opportunity for re-engagement in a place where every adult believes that all students will reach significant and far-reaching outcomes. Schools equipped to close the achievement gap are vigilant about their belief in students despite the fact that due to lack of success caused by the system, students themselves have little hope for the future. In these schools, the student outcomes are not typically isolated to a discussion about
standardized assessment data, but rather about the ways in which students have developed their voice and vision for the future.

Sadly, discussions focused on middle school reform have not attended to these factors as fully as was once hoped. The pressure to improve schools in response to external mandates requires that principals, teachers, and other education staffers’ work be responsive to tests and assessments that may not have significant social-emotional benefits for students. As Wasley, Hampel, and Clark (1997) found in their study of more than 150 students across the United States, school reform is often disconnected from the needs of students. Sirotnik (2004) suggested that external thrusts do little to improve schools when educators do not hold these reforms accountable.

**Purpose of This Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers perceive a principal who mitigates the pressure of standards-based accountability in an urban middle school using an ethic of care in order to attend to the affective experiences of middle school students. I present this study from the perspective of a former classroom teacher who is currently a middle school principal. In both capacities, I have always viewed education as the great equalizer. I believed that if we educated students, they would have choices that would enable them to overcome poverty and trauma. If you listen to the stories of our students, however, you realize that the education system is not always an equalizer. In fact, it can be a system that programs some students to have certain beliefs about their abilities. Like Max and Rhea, other capable and enthusiastic students were told they couldn’t succeed by the educators who were expected to work in support of them. The struggles of these students and many others prompted me to wonder how schools could change—
how I could change my school—to better support, serve, and encourage students with such tremendous potential.

**Research questions.** The following research question guides this research: How do middle school teachers perceive that they and their principal use an ethic of care as an orientation to reform in an urban middle school? In addition, the study will explore the following sub-questions:

- What are the barriers that teachers perceive they or their principal face when using an ethic of care as an orientation to reform in the middle school context?
- What support do teachers perceive are helpful or would be helpful when using an ethic of care as an orientation in the middle school context?
- What evidence indicates that the ethic of care is being used in the middle school as a component of the school’s reform efforts?

**Organization of This Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. The first chapter provides a brief introduction, the purpose of the study, and research questions. The second chapter reviews literature relevant to the study. The review is organized into sections. The third chapter explains the methods used to complete this research. Chapter 4 provides student perspectives from JMS, and Chapter 5 provides teacher perspectives. Chapter 6 summarizes key findings, provides a discussion, and offers conclusions.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Concerns about student achievement in middle schools—including students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades—have promoted considerable interest in the practices of middle schools. Beginning in the early 1970s and continuing today, researchers have debated the purpose and function of middle schools. In this study, I assume that middle schools focus on high expectations for academic achievement and provide for the holistic development of students of middle school age. The primary purpose of middle school is thus to prepare these students to assume a productive role in a democratic society (Felner, 1997). According to a recent report released by the U.S. Department of Education, there are persistent differences in student achievement relative to student background factors (e.g., poverty, race, etc.), school organization (e.g., school and class size), professional characteristics of the teaching staff, and school climate in schools across the United States (McLaughlin & Drori, 2000). Research suggests that there are persistent differences in student achievement among middle school-aged students, as well (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; LaRocque, 2007). Further, evidence also suggests that achievement differences in middle school contribute to a student’s success or failure in high school and beyond (Balfanz & West, 2009). The literature also suggests that school districts have made substantial efforts to reform middle schools but that these efforts do not address fundamental challenges within middle schools and middle school classrooms (Felner et al., 1997; Jackson & Davis, 2002).

Successful middle school reform depends on the school’s capacity to provide a developmentally responsive education. According to the National Middle School Association (2000), middle schools are most effective when they include educators who are committed to
young adolescents; a shared vision that places student-teacher relationships at the center of the school and creates an uplifting culture to surround them; high expectations for all students; an adult advocate for every student; strong family and community partnerships; and a positive school climate. To achieve these qualities, researchers have advocated for reforms in middle schools. School reform is perceived as large-scale initiatives that improve student achievement outcomes through accountability and standardization (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000). Reforms often involve restructuring, reorganizing, and reassessing public schools with emphasis on shared decision making, alignment of curriculum and teaching with national standards, and student-centered change (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Oakes et al., 2000). Within the middle school context, however, these reforms often neglect the developmental needs of middle school students. In particular, current reform thrusts, such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, place significant pressure on schools to improve results on achievement tests, thereby focusing educators’ attention on the acquisition of basic skills and core academic subjects.

The purpose of this chapter is to review literature related to education reform and accountability, the practices of effective middle schools and their leaders, and the cultural and developmental concerns that are unique to middle schools. In completing this review, I will convey to the reader the missed opportunities that current reform modalities have presented and propose an alternative—framed within Nodding’s ethic of care—to improve middle schools for the students who attend them. The chapter proceeds with a brief discussion of education reforms in the United States. Next, I discuss research related to effective schools with specific discussion of effective middle schools. Then, I discuss the role that principals play in supporting their
schools in supporting improvements in their schools. I conclude this chapter by presenting the theoretical framework that guides this study.

A Brief History of Education Reform

Public education in the United States has been the subject of substantial scrutiny. First, scholars expressed concern that the U.S. school system is not preparing students with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in an evolving economy (NCES, 2012). Second, researchers found that the U.S. public school system does not adequately support students from low-income and minority backgrounds despite statistical evidence suggesting remarkable demographic changes in the nation’s schools (NCES, 2012). Third, Cuban (1992) reported that the education reform movement that aimed to address persistent inequities in student achievement has ebbed and flowed. The discussion of contemporary education reform has primarily focused on introducing standards to measure education performance, implementing common assessments to regularly test students’ knowledge, and creating a combination of incentives and sanctions to “force” schools to improve. Based on my reading of the literature, there appear to be two phases of education reform. The first phase, 1965-2000, primarily focused on equalizing education inputs and ensuring equitable access for all students. The second phase, beginning in 2001 and continuing to the present day, has focused on educational outcomes and results with less emphasis on educational inputs and access. I discuss each of these phases below.

Education reform: 1965 to 2000. Although a comprehensive review of education reform in the United States is beyond the scope of this study, a brief history of education reform is important to establish the context that now surrounds middle schools and the principals who lead them. The origins of the current education reform movement can be traced to the early
1960s and the policies enacted as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. Two policies, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1965 (EOA) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), marked a significant shift in the traditional position that government held relative to U.S. public education. Whereas the government previously allowed schools considerable autonomy from federal mandates—citing the localism of school activities—the EOA and ESEA represented the federal government’s foray into education. The legislative activities of the Johnson administration launched a federal effort to win the “War on Poverty” (Springer, 2008) and to enhance educational opportunities for low-income students. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act provided funds for improved educational programs in schools serving large numbers of poor and low-income students. This focus on educational opportunity for the poor and students of color launched a national focus on reform efforts that would be necessary to support public schools in accomplishing such larger societal aims. Mitchell (2011) noted that the policies of this era were acutely focused on equalizing inputs into the education system.

The Coleman Report. This orientation reflected research from the Coleman Report, a national survey of educational outcomes that was commissioned by Congress to examine differences in student achievement in U.S. schools. Coleman and his colleagues (1966) found that school resources, including facilities, curriculum, and teacher quality, had limited influence on the academic achievement of disadvantaged minority students. The research revealed that low-income students who attended racially integrated schools where the majority of their classmates were White and more affluent performed at higher levels than their peers who attended schools that served primarily low-income students and students of color. The results showed that the most significant effect on student achievement was peer effect, which the report
described as the background characteristics of other students (Coleman et al., 1966). The report made it clear that the social composition of the school impacts student achievement through the student body’s educational background and aspirations rather than through racial composition. Jencks and colleagues (1972) confirmed Coleman et al.’s findings. Together, these reports suggested that schools alone could not eliminate the gap between poor and rich students and between capable and less capable students, that school achievement was defined by student background, and that school reform could do little to improve the influence it had on student achievement (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972).

**A Nation at Risk.** Nearly a decade later, the debate about education reform in the United States continued to simmer as new evidence and policy activities mounted. Throughout the 1970s, education reformers and policymakers continued to debate the merits of various reform initiatives. These debates intensified in the early 1980s as evidence emerged that the United States public education system had not dramatically improved despite more than two decades of federal intervention and policy action. President Ronald Reagan commissioned a review of the performance of the U.S. public school system. The National Commission on Excellence in Education studied U.S. public schools and the achievement of the students between 1963 and 1980. Their 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, provided dramatic new evidence that the U.S. school system was failing. For example, the commission found that between 1963 and 1980, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores had dropped more than 50 points on the verbal section and 40 points on the mathematics section. In response, the commission made 38 recommendations to improve public education. These recommendations related to the development of new instructional content, performance standards, learning expectations, increased time on the basics (i.e., reading, math, and writing), greater attention to
teaching quality, improved leadership, and increased fiscal support. The recommendations served as the foundation for the contemporary accountability movement.

**Contemporary accountability and standards-based performance.** The origins of the contemporary accountability movement can be traced to the early 1990s when interest in standards, assessments, and external accountability intensified as then-President George H. W. Bush worked with then-chair of the National Governors’ Association (NGA), Bill Clinton, to create six national education goals for the year 2000. The primary purpose for the goals was to ensure that every child started school ready to learn and completed school prepared for college or career. The national education goals brought considerable attention to bear on raising the national high school graduation rate to 90% and ensuring that students complete national assessments in grades 4, 8, and 12 to demonstrate an understanding of literacy and mathematics. Both of these changes had important implications for middle schools. As the “bridge” between elementary schools and high schools, middle schools serve students at a critical point in their education. Moreover, as implicated by testing at Grade 8, the work of middle schools would be placed under significant scrutiny.

The goals also had important implications for the work of school principals, including those who worked at the middle schools. The goals stated that schools would be held accountable for their performance. This meant that standards would be created for core subjects and a voluntary, national exam system would be established to monitor student progress toward the standards. Parents, teachers, schools, and communities would be provided with a national and state report card showing how schools, districts, states, and the nation were doing. The use of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) would provide state-level data in grades 4, 8, and 12 in core subjects beginning in 1994. In addition, America 2000 also
established that incentives would be provided to states and districts to adopt comprehensive school choice policies allowing the federal dollars to follow the child to his/her public school of choice. Greater flexibility was outlined, providing schools with the authority and responsibility to decide how resources would be allocated. Along with incentives, federal funds would be provided to states for use as rewards for individual schools that made notable progress toward the national education goals. In addition, America 2000 encouraged higher pay for classroom teachers in math and science. as well as for teachers working in challenging settings. The origins of the current accountability movement can be traced to the national education goals.

**Education reform: 2001 to present day.** In 2001, the full weight of standards-based accountability was revealed with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, often referred to as No Child Left Behind. NCLB is based on a theory of action that couples standards, incentives, and sanctions. It was adopted based on the assumption that external pressures coupled with sanctions would motivate schools to become more effective and eventually high performing. Central to NCLB are the beliefs that all students can learn, that schools are in control of whether students do learn, that scientifically based instructional approaches support student learning, and that quality teachers are necessary for student learning. On a basic level, the assumptions underlying NCLB policy seem logical. Data reveal whether a school needs improvement, sanctions applied to schools in need of improvement leads to school improvement, and school improvement leads to increases in student achievement. However, NCLB has prompted significant changes in the work of public schools. As McGuinn (2006) noted,

The old federal education policy regime, created in 1965, was based on a policy paradigm that saw the central purpose of school reform as promoting equity and access for
disadvantaged students . . . The policy paradigm at the heart of the NCLB regime is centered on the much broader goal of improving education for all students and seeks to do so by significantly reducing federal influence over process and inputs as well as replacing it with increased accountability for school performance. (p. 194)

For example, NCLB brought greater attention to the achievement gap between minority and majority students. Given its emphasis on disaggregated data, NCLB brought to light the persistent inequities in the nation’s public schools. In particular, it brought heightened attention to the disparities in outcomes between White students and African American and Latino students, between higher socioeconomic students and students in poverty, and between students with and without learning disabilities. NCLB brought about important conversations regarding the challenges associated with raising the standard for American students and reforming schools to enable them to support all students in reaching the bar.

*Race to the Top*. The results of Race to the Top, President Barack Obama’s signature education reform policy, remain to be seen. The intent of the policy is to maintain and intensify many of the central principles of No Child Left Behind at the same time that it introduces greater competition among public schools. The distribution of a large amount federal education funds distributed through competitive grants rather than through categorical grant programs on the basis of need was unprecedented (McGuinn, 2012). With Race to the Top, state applications were scored on the basis of the rigor proposed and adherence to five priorities: common standards and assessment, improvements to teacher training, evaluation and retention policies, creation of strong data systems, and adoption of turnaround strategies (U.S Department of Education, 2010). President Obama described our largely race- and class-based achievement gaps as unacceptable (McGuinn, 2012).
Accountability policies have had positive effects on schools; for example, research suggests that achievement disparities have closed among some subgroups (c.f., The Education Trust). However, the accountability policies have also been somewhat surprising with respect to their reshaping of the work and focus of schools. As Mitchell (2011) noted, it is surprising that the civil rights emphasis and resource augmentation thrust of the 1960s education policy could give way so dramatically to an emphasis on accountability for educational outcomes with the accompanying threats to forcibly reorganize schools and punish unproductive educators. This surprising shift in emphasis is partly grounded in the belief that quality educational research can make schooling a more technical and less cultural enterprise . . . This shift calls for changes in how research is conducted, re-grounding policy in research evidence, and making educational practices more transparent and standardized. (p. 5)

More acutely, the education accountability movement has redirected the focus of schools away from the education experience and toward the outcomes or results that schools achieve. While this shift is not altogether bad (e.g., knowledge of how schools perform can be used to improve them), it does represent a surprising departure from research conducted on effective schools where, I believe, the nexus between accountability, leadership, and middle school reform is best understood.

**Effective Schools and Developmentally Appropriate Middle Schools**

Following the Great Society as well as the significant policy activities of the 1970s, scholars invested significant energy in defining the characteristics of effective schools. Ron Edmonds (1979), one of the leading scholars on this topic, launched a research project designed to determine whether there were schools in the United States that effectively served poor
students. By the end of the 1970s, other researchers had joined in the effort to identify practices that distinguished effective from ineffective schools (c.f., Brookover & Lezotte, 1977; Edmonds & Frederksen, 1978; Edmonds & Ratner, 1974; NY Department of Education Review, 1974; Weber, 1977). The research suggested that there were commonalities among effective schools. These findings were anchored in studies that utilized large-scale quantitative studies that included student-level data. These schools supported above-average student achievement among low-income students.

**Characteristics of effective schools.** Research on effective schools indicates that at least five factors are found in effective schools. These include strong instructional leadership from the school principal, a widely held vision for instruction, an orderly and safe climate that supports teaching and learning, a culture of high expectations that is modeled—first and foremost—by classroom teachers, and frequent use of data to inform decision-making and guide the school’s instructional program (Edmonds, 1981). More recent research has included additional factors, such as positive home-school relations and increased instructional time. In the next few paragraphs, I summarize recent research related to each of these factors.

**Strong instructional leadership.** Instructional leadership is an important driver of school-based reforms that support improved student achievement. The concept of instructional leadership is widely discussed in the education literature (Glickman, 2002; Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Smith & Andrews, 1989). However, as Hallinger (2005) noted, the concept of instructional leadership is poorly defined in the literature. In this discussion, I assume that instructional leadership refers to “the shared work and commitments that provide direction for instructional improvement and that engage the efforts and energy of teachers and others in pursuit of powerful, equitable interactions among teachers, learners, and content in response to
environmental demands” (Knapp, Mkhwanazi, & Portin, 2012, pp. 191-192). Thus, instructional leadership is about the quality of teaching and learning as well as the engagement of staff in efforts to improve teaching and learning in service of the school’s students. This conception presumes that principals understand “the tenets of quality instruction” and has “sufficient knowledge of curriculum to ensure that appropriate content is being delivered to all students” (p. 29). This presumes that principals can engage teachers in conversations about their practice in such a way that the teachers recognize inadequacies and feel compelled to change them (Coldren & Spillane, 2007; Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

**Vision for instruction.** The effective schools research also suggests that the principal must establish and communicate a vision for vision in the school, especially as it relates to classroom instruction. According to Weber (1971), reading instruction that provides strong support around comprehension, decoding, and fluency are commonplace in these schools. At the middle level, this vision also incorporates aspects of caring and interpersonal relationships that provide students with a developmentally appropriate learning experience (Felner, 1997; Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Lipsitz, 1982). Programs that make use of direct instructional approaches fail students (Fullan et al., 2006). These types of programs put teachers in control and ensure that the student must follow the teacher. Developmentally appropriate and caring programs put the student at the forefront and ensure that the teacher follows the students; thus students are in control of their own learning (Farr, 2010; Fullan et al., 2006)

**Environment that supports teaching and learning.** The effective schools literature also suggested that strategic use of resources coupled with an orderly environment was essential for creating conditions that supported teaching and learning (Bloom, Thompson, Unterman, Herlihy, & Payne, 2010; Edmonds, 1979; Farr, 2010; Lezotte, Edmonds, & Ratner, 1974; Marzano,
According to Marzano and Kendall (1996), time is the most precious resource, especially when working with students who are years behind academically. Environments that ensure learning is happening before, during, and after school are essential (Farr, 2010).

An environment that places students in control of their own learning is called personalized (Tomlinson, 1998). There are two components of personalization: motivation to learn and pedagogy that is developmentally appropriate, meeting the individual’s needs (Farr, 2010; Lipsitz, 1984; Tomlinson, 1998). Goodlad (1984), Boyer (1983), and Sizer (1984, 1996) stated that school practices must have workable structures, meaning that teachers must have a limited number of students and classes so they can get to know students. Several studies have shown that high-quality teacher-student relationship predicts academic achievement (Brand, Glasson, & Green, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Stevens, Olivarez, & Hamman, 2006; Stewart, 2008). Hamre and Pianta (2005) found that high-quality teacher-student relationships close the gap between high- and low-risk students. In a study conducted by Balfanz and Byrnes (2006), Black and Latino middle school students who had supportive classroom environments were able to close the gap in mathematics.

**A culture of high expectations.** The effective schools research also determined that a culture of “high expectations” for all students is correlated with increased student achievement. Weber found that in these schools, high expectations were not something that was stated by school personnel, but was found in their actions such as emphasizing a standard of student achievement and providing support for students to reach the standard (Chenoweth, 2007; Edmonds, 1979). This culture has been described in various terms, but in contemporary discussions the culture of high expectations has been associated with high academic expectations based on key learning standards (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lee &
Smith, 1999). In their examination of middle schools, the Southern Regional Educational Board found that high-poverty schools generate greater student achievement if they are held to a clear set of challenging standards (Cooney, 1998, 1999). Furthermore, the adults in highly effective schools accept responsibility for student learning and set high expectations for themselves (Massell, 1998).

In combination with a personalized learning experience, high expectations can improve academic achievement (Ames, 1990; Linnenbrink, 2005). Mastery goals that focus on gaining comprehension or competence, on effort, and on personal improvement toward a standard support students’ acquiring a deep understanding of concepts (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Linnenbrink, 2005). Wolton (2004), in a study of middle school students, showed that mastery orientation is positively related to cognitive engagement and math grades. Several researchers have found that by implementing personalized mastery goal setting, classroom teachers are able to increase the self-efficacy of students, one significant element of a developmentally appropriate teaching practice and an ethic of care (Fast et al., 2010; Friedel, Cortina, Turner, & Midgley, 2010; Gutman, 2006; Kaplan, Gheen, & Midley, 2002; Linnenbrink, 2005; Walker & Greene, 2009). When teachers provide students with praise for effort, an element of care, students are more likely able to adopt mastery goals that are directly linked to malleable beliefs about competence and smartness (Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Data-informed decision making. Also closely aligned with high expectations and strong reading instruction is the common practice of frequent assessment and monitoring. In these schools, achievement was closely monitored and interventions were provided when necessary (Edmonds, 1979). In more recent discussions, data-informed decision making has been characterized as a way of leading through inquiry (Copland & Knapp, 2006). In middle schools,
this would entail moving away from one pathway to success as outlined in NCLB toward a paradigm that establishes multiple pathways, all evidence based, that can lead to positive student achievement outcomes (Boykin, 2000; Boykin & Ellison, 2009). Focusing on the individual growth of a student toward his/her mastery goals (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Linnenbrink, 2005; Wolton, 2005) means that school leaders, including teachers, must have strong problem-identification and problem-solving orientations (Murphy & Hallinger, 1993). When this orientation is focused on the individual’s goals and not on the potential gain for anyone else, an ethic of care is being used (Noddings, 2007).

**Effective Middle Schools**

Studies on effective schools, the elements that compose those schools, and the characteristics of effective middle schools are often treated as separate bodies of research. However, my review of the literature suggests that there are parallels between these topics. As research emerged about the patterns of practice found in effective schools, middle school educators worked to define the purpose for middle schools and the practices that make middle schools effective (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2004). Joan Lipsitz (1980) wrote a seminal work, *Growing up Forgotten*, that described middle school as the most critical time in a child’s development. She argued that during this period, when children determine whether to check in or out of school, to become motivated by the future, and to tackle great obstacles, a model of schooling that is developmentally responsive is essential (Lipsitz, 1980). According to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (CCAD), “Middle school is potentially society’s most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift, yet [these schools often] exacerbate problems with a mismatch of organization and curriculum that does not meet the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of students” (p. 5).
The research on effective middle schools reflects many of the same themes that I found in the effective schools research. For example, strong principal leadership is seen as an important element of effective schools (Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte et al., 1974; Madden, Lawson, & Sweet, 1976; Weber, 1971) and is highlighted as an important factor in effective middle schools (Clark & Valentine, 1981; CCAD, 1989; NASSP, 1985; NMSA, 1982). The principal was found to be pivotal in ensuring that the school mission is understood by all of the stakeholders. Additionally, similarly to researchers on effective schools, scholars who examined middle schools found that principal leadership is essential if the school climate and culture are to meet the needs of all learners (Alexander & George, 1981; CCAD, 1989; Clark & Valentine, 1981; NASSP, 1985; NMSA, 1982). Indeed, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) (1982) and National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) (1985) both found that the culture and the climate of the school were two of the significant factors in school improvement. An atmosphere of excellence around academics and self were found in effective middle schools (NASSP, 1985; NMSA, 1982; Weber, 1971).

Although school structure and organization were not addressed in the effective schools research, research on middle schools suggests that both elements matter (NMSA, 1982; NASSP, 1985; CCAD, 1989). Whereas the CCAD (1989) was specific in recommending smaller communities for learning, the NMSA (1982) was more general in suggesting that the organization of middle schools needs to be varied to meet the needs of middle school students. Similar to Edmonds (1979), who found that effective schools provide support of students to reach high standards, the NASSP (1985) emphasized that school organization should encourage communication and support teacher and student control over the quality of the learning environment.
In the 1980s, effective middle schools focused the pattern of “high expectations and standards” critical for effective schools (Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte et al., 1974; Madden et al., 1976; Weber, 1971) more specifically on particular curriculum and courses appropriate for middle level learners (Clark & Valentine, 1981). The NMSA (1982) determined that the content of a middle school should be balanced and should incorporate exploratory classes and core academic classes. NASSP also found that curriculum must include an emphasis on student development, particularly personal attributes and behaviors (NASSP, 1985). The CCAD (1989) recommended that schools provide a consistent set of core curriculum. Likewise, the NASSP (1985) recommended that the level of academic content be challenging, inclusive of content that provided time for students to build problem solving and thinking skills. Assessment, data collection, and evaluation of student progress were critical components of middle schools as well (CCAD, 1989; NASSP, 1985).

The CCAD (1989) recommended that schools promote healthful practices, noting that learning and health are positively linked. This finding aligned closely with work completed by Clark and Valentine (1981, 1992), who found that provisions for physical education, instruction in health, and sex education were critical in middle schools. Unique to the NASSP (1985) was the inclusion of technology education.

**Developmentally Responsive Middle Schools**

Effective middle schools must have the ability to meet students’ developmental needs. Beane (1990), in writing about effective middle schools, emphasized that the most successful middle school educators provide a balanced response to aspects of learning and development. Lipsitz (1984) conducted comprehensive research on four successful middle schools and found that
Schools responsive to early adolescent development will reduce the size of the focus groups, personalize the quality of adult-student relationships, give ample room for peer groups to flourish, acknowledge diverse areas of competence, involve students in participatory activities, and encompass all of these in a clearly defined, structured environment. (p. 199)

These “developmentally responsive strategies” became key identifying traits of effective middle schools (Clark & Valentine, 1992; Lipsitz, 1984). They combined what was known about effective school practices and linked them to the unique developmental needs of middle school-age students.

Developmentally responsive strategies focus on the contextual conditions in which teaching, learning, engagement happen (Darling-Hammond, 2007, 2010). When teachers focus on the emerging or existing interests, motivational inclinations, commitments, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of the student along with their prior experiences, knowledge, and competencies, the conditions in which to teach or bring out student strengths become more apparent (Beck, 1994; Brand et al., 2006). This means that there will be interaction between adults and students in the learning environment (Beck, 1994; Maeroff, 1990). The quality of this interpersonal relationship is significant for positive student outcomes (Borman & Overman, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Iruka, Burchinal, & CAI, 2010).

One of the most complex, developmentally responsive strategies is the ability of adults to meld a student’s interests, perceptions, and current skill levels with the required curriculum. The more teachers and students are on the same page with these high expectations, the greater the chance they will be met (Stewart, 2006, 2008). Mastery goal setting is one of the most
significant, research-based ways to achieve this personal relevance for students (Gutman, 2006; Harachiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Interpersonal relationships and personal relevance are the two most significant developmentally responsive strategies employed in effective middle schools (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; Lee & Smith, 1999; Liew, Chen, & Hughes, 2010). Connections become key in highly effective middle schools. Many schools pay close attention to structures that limit the number of adults students must interact with by staying with students for more than 1 year and working in small teams. Effective middle schools strive to offer a connected and consistent curriculum that matches student interests and needs. Highly effective middle schools have staff that understand the critical role they play in engaging students in school so that they are able and motivated to continue their education through high school and beyond (Beck, 1994; Clark & Valentine, 1992; Lipsitz, 1984).

**Middle school reform strategies.** Based on my review of the literature, four reform strategies provide an environment for the cultivation of interpersonal relationships and personal relevance and have been advocated in nearly all of the studies of successful middle schools. First and foremost, school-to-family connections have been noted in several studies (CCAD, 1989; NASSP, 1985; NMSA, 1982). The CCAD (1989) and NASSP (1985) both emphasized the need for the community and families to be connected to the school. The stronger the connections between community agencies and families, the greater the likelihood that student needs were met. In order for middle school students to experience the greatest success, they need to feel connected to the program environment and content.

A second strategy relates to advising and counseling support. Both strategies support the type of connectedness recommended by the NMSA (1982). By the early 1990s, 40% of schools
had an interdisciplinary teaming process (Valentine et al., 2004), and 66% had schedules that included guidance or advisory programs (Cawelti, 1988; Mac Iver, 1990). In more recent research, advising and counseling focused on supporting students with goal setting. When middle schools move from focusing on performance goals, defined as those that focus on competence in comparison with others and on being the best (Ames, 1990), toward mastery goals, defined as those that focus on gaining competence, effort, and personal improvement toward standards (Ames, 1990), students are supported in changing beliefs that success is fixed and malleable (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Pintrich, 2000). Goal setting around mastery and improvement leads to greater achievement and performance (Harachiewicz et al., 2002) and supports students in gaining greater self-efficacy (Fast et al., 2010; Friedel et al., 2010; Gutman, 2006; Kaplan et al., 2002; Linnenbrink, 2005; Walker & Greene, 2009).

A third strategy relates to the support provided to students to help them transition to high schools (CCAD, 1989; NASSP, 1985). The CCAD (1989) recommended that large middle schools be divided into smaller communities to ease the transition from middle school and create a more personalized atmosphere for students. Hamre and Pianta (2005) found that the degree to which students felt they had personal support, especially emotional support, determined their level of engagement. They also found that when students were provided this kind of support, the gap between high-risk and low-risk students closed at a faster rate. Similarly, Balfanz and Byrnes (2006) found that middle school Black and Latino students who learned in highly supportive, personalized environments raised their math performances significantly.

The importance of highly personalized environments along with goal setting through advising and counseling cannot be overemphasized. In several research studies, Black and White students were asked about what contributed to their success in school. Mooney and
Thorton (1999) found that more Black middle school students attributed success to rapport and relationship with teachers, whereas as more White middle school students attributed success to their own abilities. Seventy-two percent of Black students stated they wanted to please their teachers, whereas only 30% of White students stated they desired to please their teachers (Mooney & Thorton, 1999). Simply stated, many Black students learn from their teacher and for their teacher. A direct relationship between classroom engagement and performance and students’ recognition that their teachers care for them and are interested in their performance is well documented (Tucker et al., 2002; Mireles-Ricos & Romo, 2010; Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009).

The fourth strategy recommended by all three organizations was an emphasis on teacher quality and teacher training specific to the middle level (CCAD, 1989; NASSP, 1985; NMSA, 1982). Great emphasis was placed on the importance of hiring teachers who understand adolescent development and who are committed to their development. Given the effects of personalized environments and teacher relationships on student outcomes, middle school leaders should be hiring people with a “fearless and empathetic regard for students” (Lightfoot, 1983, p. 342). Leithwood and Montgomery (1982) also found that in effective schools, the school leader’s first priority is the achievement and happiness of their students.

**Evidence of effectiveness.** Research on the effectiveness of these strategies suggests that schools that fully implement these conditions demonstrate the most significant improvements in student learning (Clark & Clark, 1998; Felner et al., 1997; Valentine et al., 2004). In their study of 31 middle schools, Felner et al. (1997) found that schools that focused their reform on the components of effective middle schools had an average gain of 20.9 percentile points in both reading and math over 2 years compared with schools that moderately implemented some of the
components, which showed gains of 2.7%. In 26 Massachusetts middle schools utilizing middle school reform strategies, achievement gains on the state assessment exceeded those of other schools that were moderately implementing various reform components (DePascale, 1997). Through the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s Middle Start initiative, 20 Michigan middle schools focused on fidelity of implementation to effective middle school components showed school improvement by 10% in reading and 6% in math compared with gains of only 4% in 125 Michigan middle schools that did not implement effective middle school components with high fidelity (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998).

Despite the success of middle schools that have implemented these reforms in full, the majority of schools across the nation have not implemented these changes, and thus most have had limited success in improving student achievement. According to Balfanz and Mac Iver (2000), more than 50% of the students in urban districts do not successfully transition to high school from middle school because of the poor quality of the education program. There may be several causes for limited success of middle school reforms, including low fidelity to implementation of components of effective middle schools and significant changes in legislative mandates and accountability. According to Jackson and Davis (2000), middle school reforms have become fragmented; because of various policy directors, the effectiveness of middle school reforms has been reduced. The high-stakes demands around the accountability movement could have enhanced components of effective middle schools by introducing high expectations, standards, and challenging content; however, these accountability measures narrowed the focus of most middle school reforms at the expense of developmentally responsive approaches (Clark & Clark, 1997, 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Valentine et al., 2004). This narrowing exacerbated failed reform efforts.
Balfanz and Mac Iver (2000) found that 50% of the students in America’s largest cities were not able to make the transition to high school successfully. Given that less than 10 years was allotted to build effective middle schools with academic excellence and high levels of support, significant outcomes were limited. As a result, higher academic standards, common annual assessments, and test analyses to show and compare student growth were used as common reform strategies (U.S Department of Education, 2010). American College Testing (ACT) in 2008 published findings from 216,000 students in high school graduating classes of 2005 and 2006 that showed the predictive strength of variables regarding on-time graduation. The variable of scores on 8th-grade standardized exams predicted achievement better than anything else, including family background, grade point average, attendance, and behavior (ACT, 2008). Balfanz (2009) studied 23 middle schools in Philadelphia with a poverty and minority rate of 80% and found that if students had strong teachers, showed up, and tried hard, they had at least a 10% gain on standardized exams. He further studied 30 middle schools implementing comprehensive reform to identify whether schools could have known students had fallen off the graduation path. He found that if students failed math or language arts, or attended less than 80% of the time, there was a 75% chance they would not graduate on time. Multiple indicators increased the likelihood of failing to graduate on time by 10% (Balfanz, 2009). EdSource (2010) studied 303 middle schools in California using three large scale surveys of superintendents, teachers and principals. EdSource found that high-performing schools tend to have stronger agreement among all stakeholders regarding the need for a clear, consistent, intense focus on improving academic outcomes. The summary of these four studies has illuminated three focus areas for current middle school reform: warning systems to signal when students are in need of support; the importance of middle school in relation to high school
dropout and on-time graduation rates; and grades in math and language arts, achievement scores on nationally normed exams, and academic behaviors such as attendance and discipline (ACT, 2008; Balfanz, 2009).

**Losing sight of what matters.** Middle school is a developmental period for adolescents (CCAD, 1989; Noddings, 1994). Beyond the biological changes associated with puberty, changes in how children interact with family and peers, the social-emotional changes related to self-awareness and self-control, and the cognitive changes that allow children to move toward more abstract thinking all converge within the 2-3 years a child spends in middle school (Jackson & Davis, 2000). These changes can have a significant impact on a variety of developmental outcomes, including academic achievement, self-concept development, and achievement motivation. They also have a significant impact on the role of middle level educators in meeting the unique developmental needs of children.

Beck (1994) explained that educators have the privilege of building environments in which adolescents learn and develop as healthy, moral, responsible spouses, parents, workers, citizens, friends, and individuals. In the middle school, educators do this at a time when children are passing through their formative years; therefore, educators greatly influence how this development occurs and what adolescents learn about behavior in such relationships. The Annenberg Institute of School Reform (1994), the National Association of School Principals (NASSP, 1996), and the Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer, 1996) all concluded that personalization of instruction and relationships between adults and students were essential elements of school reform.

Environments conducive for academic excellence and high levels of support have been difficult for educators to create in an era of accountability. Despite the research by Jackson and
Davis (2000) and Lee and Smith (1999) indicating that academic excellence coupled with the support necessary to achieve it provides the cocoon middle school students need to take risks and find their voice, the focused requirements of accountability policy have required schools to narrow content to focus on student outcomes associated with standardized achievement exams (McGuinn, 2012; Noddings, 2007). The narrow emphasis placed on outputs (standardized achievement scores) by NCLB policy has stymied the focus that was once placed on what middle school students were getting as inputs (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Noddings, 2007). If we believe that the purpose of education is to increase democratic participation in our world, then our focus must move beyond just educating students for a career and include the components of citizenship and living a happy, fulfilled life (Dewey, 1938; Noddings, 2003). This means that schools must attend to the social-emotional development of adolescents at a formable time in their lives (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1999; Noddings, 1988). Middle school principals have an important role to play in attending to the developmental needs of students. In the next section, I review literature related to middle school principal leadership.

**Principal Leadership in Middle Schools**

Given accountability mandates as well as the developmental needs of their students, middle school principals find themselves at the center of these converging realities. On one hand, they face increased expectations that middle schools will produce student achievement results. On the other hand, principals serve a unique population of students for whom the cultural and social needs of schools may prove more influential in the long term. The literature suggests that leadership—particularly principal leadership—is important for school improvement. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010), in a large national study, found that leadership is second only to classroom teachers in terms of its impact on student
learning. Consistent with previous studies, the literature suggests that leaders have an indirect influence on student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Their influence is mediated through classroom instructional practices (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Given this relationship, scholars have long asserted that strong instructional leadership is necessary for schools to be successful.

Acker-Hocevar, Cruz-Janzen, and Wilson (2012) suggested a model to explain how school leaders can manage the competing demands of accountability mandates and the need to create school culture focused on student growth. While this model is not specific to middle schools, I assert that it applies to the middle school setting. The conceptual model addresses the three challenges that Beck (1994) suggested are the most difficult for principals who work in middle schools: improving academic performance, battling social problems, and re-thinking organizational structures for greater empowerment.

Acker-Hocevar and colleagues (2012) argued that leadership in schools must be learning focused, must be distributed, and must share privileges with students and staff (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2006; Starratt, 1991). This is particularly true in middle schools, where the primary thrust of the instructional program is not only to provide challenging academic experiences to students but also to support students in a nurturing environment. Leadership is essential to creating this type of environment. In fact, as Acker-Hocevar and colleagues found in studying high-poverty schools in Florida that demonstrated sustained achievement improvements, school culture and trust are integrally involved in developing sustainable improvements in the schools. Copland (2003) stated that three important organizational preconditions are necessary for distributed leadership. First, a culture of collaboration, trust, professional learning, and reciprocal accountability must be present. Second, there must be strong consensus around the important problems facing the
school. Third, there must be rich expertise with approaches to improving teaching and learning among all those working in the school. Elmore (2000) argued that the hierarchy of authority and responsibility must be broken down and positioned in the core of the school. Copland (2003) contributed to the notion that the “chain of command approach” does not work, stating, “The history of school reform shows us that strategies for improving teaching and learning fundamentally succeed or fail in the interaction between teachers and students behind the classroom door” (p. 379). One significant aspect of distributed leadership is the distribution of power to all members of the organization to facilitate changes in values and beliefs (Fullan, 2002; Heifetz, 1994).

The effects of democratic, supportive, shared leadership were studied by Leithwood and Jantzi (1999, 2006). The impact of collective leadership on the key teacher variables of teacher motivation, teacher knowledge and skills, and teacher working conditions were linked to student achievement. Across schools, the degree of collective leadership explained 20% of the variation in student achievement. The strongest effects collective leadership had on teacher variables were found to be teachers’ work settings. Collective leadership was found to influence student achievement through teacher motivation and work setting (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, 2006).

Accompanying the leadership vision of the school are the decision-making and communication structures that are created to support personal growth, empowerment, voice, and shared work. Starratt (1991) suggested that the building principal becomes less visible as these structures are created and begins to act as a facilitator between community members. Voices are then allowed to share stories, histories, perspectives, and possibilities before actions are taken. In this way, all members of the community have a role and responsibility in shaping why and how a decision is made. Any decision within the community then reflects the connection
between self-efficacy, interpersonal relationships, and personal growth and achievement (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Starratt, 1991). This dynamic creates a caring environment in which members learn together how to make the best decisions. Communication is honest, respectful, and honoring while support is present for discourse and debate when competing demands arise (Beck, 1994; Knapp et al., 2012; Noddings, 1988; Theoharis, 2009).

At the middle level, culture/climate and parent-community involvement are especially important considerations for principals. In terms of the implementation of effective middle school strategies, research shows that these two elements were left off of many reform agendas and that as a result, schools never saw the achievement results they desired (Jackson & Austin, 1997; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Midgley & Edelin, 1998). Frequently, little time in schools is spent listening to the voices of all students and parents about what needs and values they hold. The importance of both culture/climate and parent-community involvement in schools becomes secondary to achievement. Yet both of these “roots” provide essential nutrients for the core to survive and without them, we will continue, as we have, to see schools fail to meet their full potential, and certainly we will never see significantly improved academic achievement outcomes (Beck, 1994; Mitra, 2008; Noddings, 1994).

Positive school culture and climate are a direct result of a leader’s placing extreme value on the development and care of human beings within the school (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 1984). In her study of student voice in school reform, Mitra (2008) found that students engage with learning at deeper levels when they have some say in what happens in their school. Likewise, Wilson and Corbett (2001) found that when adults listened to students, the strength of relationships was so much stronger that both attendance and achievement increased simply because students felt they wanted to do well for their teachers. While climate and culture do not
center singularly on students, they do center on relationship within the community. Students
cannot be left out of those relationships, and the relationships cannot be imposed on students.

At the middle level, principals must work with staff to develop these shared leadership
structures and a culture of trust, care, and community (Louis, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1989). To that
end, principals must learn to protect their staff from those unnecessary mandates that have the
power to negatively affect the personal and academic lives of teachers and students (Rorrer &
Skrla, 2003). Honest conversations about such sifting will help the principal facilitate long-term
solutions to the complex problem of balancing system expectations with the school community’s
expectations.

**Theoretical Framework**

To understand how middle school principals work to improve their schools, I used *ethic
of care* as the theoretical framework for this study (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 1984; Starratt, 1991).
Noddings (1984) defined care as “stepping out of one’s personal frame of reference into the
other’s point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us” (p. 24). Mayeroff (1971)
reported that fostering development is central to care: “To care for another person, in the most
significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself” (p. 1). The ethic of care calls on
educators to suspend their judgments and focus on the promotion of growth and development of
students as people (Beck, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Starratt, 1991). For the
purposes of this study, I defined care as taking responsibility to help another person grow
academically, emotionally, and personally.

My review of the literature suggests that there are at least three studies that demonstrate
that the ethic of care aligns with developmentally responsive middle schools. Maeroff (1990)
found that in highly successful middle schools, a caring atmosphere was present. Nothing
regarding relationships was left to chance. Small structures were used to support students in building close bonds with peers and staff, competition was discouraged, and a sense of community was a point of pride. In a similar study, Lightfoot (1983) looked at six middle schools with exemplary academic achievement outcomes. These schools had a fearless and empathic regard for students. Students expressed a sense of loyalty and belonging. Organizational strategies clearly demonstrated an interest in all students, with extra support being given to vulnerable students. Lightfoot acknowledged that good schools were places where students felt worthy of respect. Kohut (1990) found that quality middle schools used flexible curriculum that met the needs of individual students and allowed for personalization. Staff and students noted that the principal shared responsibility and privileges with students and staff. Community and interdependence were valued by all members of the school.

The importance of care in the development of people is critical and the essence of the purpose of middle schools. Aljose and Joyner (1990) argued that it is necessary to expose students to caring schools because the priority for schools must be to help students become caring, cooperative citizens as well as academically proficient students (p. 201). In order to be citizens, people must live in community with one another, meaning relationships and interdependence are essential (Beck, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Starratt, 1991).

**Elements of caring leadership in middle schools.** This study proceeded from the premise that the culture of urban middle schools must significantly change and that leaders—particularly principals—occupy a central role in defining, shaping, guiding, and sustaining this culture of middle schools. This notion represents a different focus for instructional leaders and instructional leadership. Since research on the impact of principals as instructional leaders has clearly identified the impact of this type of leadership on student achievement outcomes
(Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Copland, 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2012), it is important to note that caring school leaders are also instructional leaders. Researchers recognize that leaders must focus on student personal growth and development. Further, leaders must focus their work on supporting teachers in developing learning environments that are supportive of students (Beck, 1994; Beck & Murphy, 1993; CCAD, 1989). For principals who use care as a focus for their leadership, their work becomes focused on supporting teachers to create a culture with students that causes them to engage in school (Beaudoin, 2005; Knapp, 1995; Noddings, 2005). This means that principals are mobilizing people to change the school’s systems and structures so that student learning and growth are optimized (Donaldson, 2006; Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

Leadership practices become more focused on the development of relationships that allow people to accomplish their goals (Noddings, 2005). Instructional leadership is thus anchored by four interrelated concepts: values, community, relationships, and empowerment. I will discuss each of these concepts in the sections that follow.

**Values.** The notion of values is largely tied to what scholars and school educators call vision (Felner et al., 1997: Lipsitz, 1983; Noddings, 2007). The cultivation of a community’s ideals concerning what might be and can be is how vision is best defined (Barth, 1990; Bennis, 1984; Sergiovanni, 1992). In caring environments, school personnel hold a vision that all students and staff can grow (Beck, 1994); therefore, goal setting becomes a critical component of a caring school culture.

What people in the culture set goals around is entirely a result of what values the system evokes. In the era of standards-based schooling, schools have a responsibility to support students in meeting high expectations around standards (ACT, 2008; Balfanz, 2009; Copland, 2003). If these standards are not achieved, students are at risk for failing to attain successful, happy lives
in the future (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 2005). Therefore, in caring middle schools, value must be placed on academics. This valuation of academics translates into what scholars call *academic press* (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999). Academic press is defined as a “school’s average of teachers’ reports about their school’s focus on academic achievement and students’ reports about whether their teachers challenge them to reach high levels of achievement” (Lee et al., 1999, p. 12).

Several scholars found that in effective middle schools, a balanced approach to education, with both academic and developmental focuses, had the greatest impact on student success (Beane, 1990; Brand et al., 2006; Clark & Valentine, 1992; Lipsitz, 1984). In addition to valuing skills and knowledge, middle schools must value self-efficacy. Self-efficacy has potency in terms of predicting academic outcomes (Bandura, 1993; Byrnes & Miller, 2007; Friedel et al., 2010; Schunk, 2003). According to Bandura (1977), “An efficacy expectation is the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the [desired] outcomes” (p. 193). Self-efficacy then, has significant impacts on how students perceive their future. One way to develop self-efficacy is through goal-setting care (Fast et al., 2010; Friedel et al., 2010; Gutman, 2006; Kaplan et al., 2002; Linnenbrink, 2005; Walker & Greene, 2009). When schools value growth-oriented goal setting around academics and personal interests, they demonstrate that they value effort. This translates into what students perceive as a view that the adults in the school value them and that their accomplishments are simply a sign of growth and development (Beck, 1994). Furthermore, in order for individuals to set goals, an implicit or explicit value is communicated that each person should have a say in decisions that affect her or him (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 2003), which leads to a student-centered culture.
Community. When an ethic of care guides the work of a middle school, a focus on the community is emphasized (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 2003). Just the notion of caring requires community. Caring as it is perceived by prominent scholars requires a relationship between persons and a commitment (Beck, 1994; Mayeroff, 1971; Noddings, 1984). Gilligan (1982) specifically used the word *interdependence* to describe the relationship. Scholars also argue that these relationships are most supportive when they are in environments that focus on community and state that they are critical for personal development (Beck, 1994; Mitchell, 1990). Mitchell (1990) specifically calls for a community that supports consistent and constant “nurturance of belong” (p. 39).

One of the signatures of an effective middle school is the development of positive, supportive interactions among and between staff and students (Epstein, 1990). By focusing on the community, schools engage students in an examination of the effect of their actions on others (Noddings, 2005). Rather than teaching about other cultures, schools that are focused on community create an atmosphere in which natural interactions with others teach lessons necessary for life in a global society (Noddings, 2005). Wasley et al. (1997) found that progress in changing a school’s culture was made when members of the community engaged in collaboration to determine new directions. Not only were individuals able to grow in their ability to communicate and interact, but the broader community learned to push one another to participate.

Relationships. Education is a human enterprise (Copland, 2003; Farr, 2010; Gilligan, 1982; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Noddings, 1984; Starratt, 1991). In schools with an ethic of care, commitment to people and to relationships is emphasized (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 1984,
The quality of the relationship has far-reaching outcomes for both personal development and academic achievement.

Stevens et al. (2006) found that with Latino and White students, positive feedback and self-efficacy were the two strongest predictors of math achievement. Similarly, studies conducted by Borman and Overman (2004), Brand et al. (2006), and Stewart (2006, 2008) all found that the quality of teacher-student relationships can help develop resiliency and motivation and ultimately boost achievement scores.

What is meant by a quality relationship? Noddings (2005) explained, “Caring teachers listen and respond differentially to their students” (p. 19). Simply telling a student “I care” is not enough. It is important to note that often educators believe they know what is in the best interest of a student and decide what needs to happen without ever listening to what the student has to say (Noddings, 2005). One characteristic of a quality relationship, then, is responsiveness.

At the heart of quality relationships is the notion of being in relation with another (Beck 1994; Farr, 2010; Noddings, 2005). There are two components that are necessary to being in relation with another. First, communication must be present. Because often in education communication can be construed as being one-way, we will use the term dialogue instead. When two people dialogue with one another, they must be in a sustained conversation and must be exploring perspectives and ideas together (Noddings, 2005). The second component necessary for being in relation with another is shared decision making (Noddings, 2005). If children are to grow, the decision must sometimes be made to let them take a risk (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 2005). Additionally, growth requires that students and adults together grapple with making decisions about what is important at their school (Sizer, 1992).
Empowerment. When a school is focused on empowering the members of the community, it builds systems and structures that allow three things to happen: voices are heard, students are involved in decision making, and students develop a sense of who they are (Beaudoin, 2005; Beck, 1994; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Noddings; 2005, 2007; Wasley et al., 1997). John Dewey (1963) argued that teachers needed to begin with the experience and interests of students and build connections to important content from there. In an ethic of care, this relationship goes further. Noddings (2005) argues that it goes beyond the things students need to know and toward developing in students a belief and skill set that allows them to object to some material that is studied. Building capacity in students to articulate their opinions, desires, knowledge, and ideas is a hallmark of schools focused on care (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 2005).

Beyond providing opportunities for adults and students to make decisions together, caring schools focus on helping everyone in the community have a collective responsibility for learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). This type of shared decision making breaks down hierarchies and contributes to the development of relationships as well (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Noddings, 2005, 2007). Such a dynamic contributes to notions of empowerment in that it fosters a belief that all members of the community, including students, have the power to influence and impact what happens in their world (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Noddings, 2005, 2007).

When individuals have a clear sense of who they are, they are more likely to reach their goals (Bandura, 1994). In order to support students in developing this sense of identity, schools focused on care spend time supporting students in developing a process in which they develop goals for learning and life, create plans, monitor the plans, and evaluate their results (Farr, 2010;
Pintrich, 2000; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). One of the important outcomes that is emphasized by the schools must be that students have control over their own learning and therefore, can steer and direct their future (Farr, 2010; Horner & O’Connor, 2007; Schunk & Zimmerman). For the purposes of this study, I call this having a *future-orientation*.

**Barriers to leading with care in middle schools.** There are two reasons that principals find it difficult to lead with care in middle schools. One reason is related to the differences in values educators use to filter how and why they provide particular support (Gilligan, 1982; Starratt, 1991). Gilligan (1982) connected notions of care to the expressed desire of Title I, urban educators who want to support children in their navigation of the education system. Despite the trauma and obstacles children experience in their daily lives, educators recognize and see it as their moral imperative to act in a way that alleviates harm caused by the “real and recognizable trouble of this world” (Gilligan, 1982 p. 100). Starratt (1991) suggested that each person must be aware of his/her status and circumstance. Noddings (2007) and Beck (1994) advised that the giver must put his/her own self in the reality of the receiver. Both are notions of social justice that are critical in supporting the outcomes of human and community growth. Absent an ethic of justice and critique, educators attempt to support children in navigating an education system that perpetuates the growth of White, middle-class values and lacks a larger perspective and “voice” that is inclusive of others.

Another reason care does not show up in middle schools is that the current reform strategies related to narrowly focused achievement goals will fall short for middle school principals as they attempt to bridge accountability mandates with a more comprehensive approach to school. Research from ACT (2008), Balfanz (2009), and EdSource (2010) has contributed to a stronger, singular focus on strategies based on attending to failing grades in
English and math and achievement scores on nationally normed exams. Despite the research from these sources, and from Lee and Smith (1999) regarding academic behaviors and attendance, the narrow academic achievement focus has caused many middle school leaders to abandon everything they know about what makes an effective middle school. However, because the strategies fail to include the student in decision making, the strategies result in a focus on school outcomes and not on the overall growth of the student. Schools may see the number of failing grades decrease and achievement scores rise a few percentile points, but students will not carry these behaviors into high school. This reality is evidenced by the high number of freshmen failing courses in high school (ACT, 2008; Balfanz, 2009).
Chapter 3

Methods

Research for this study was completed using a qualitative case study. The case examines the leadership practices of a middle school principal who worked with teacher leaders to balance the social-emotional needs of middle school-aged students with the external pressures of accountability. The unit of analysis was the principal’s leadership actions as perceived by the teacher leaders. The study included a group of teacher leaders who worked with the school principal to develop a school culture that replaced the accountability-driven focus with one more acutely aimed at promoting the ethic of care. The teacher leaders worked to create a culture that allowed students to have a greater role in decision making regarding their education. The teacher leaders worked on the creation of this environment for approximately 2 years. As the building principal, I was part of this work.

Rationale for Selecting a Case Study

I selected a descriptive case study for this research because of its strength in describing the context, interactions, and setting that surrounds research participants (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1985). The case study method affords thick description through interview and observation with the desired outcome of understanding situations rather than predicting future outcomes (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative methodology is well suited for studies focused on the phenomenon of leadership because such methodology offers rich descriptions of actions and perspectives of those living within the context that help readers understand the unique set of circumstances of the phenomenon (Patton, 1985).

Given this study’s focus on the social-emotional dimensions that middle school principals must attend to, the qualitative case study allowed me to describe the setting of the research and
situate the participants’ actions, thoughts, and views within that setting. This allowed me, as the researcher, to provide a rich description of the contextual setting as well as the participants’ perceptions of the leadership actions that support the social-emotional development of the students attending Jefferson Middle School (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1985). Understanding how people within the school interpret their experience with this type of reform and how they have constructed their school using a social-emotional approach adds to the breadth of research on reform using instructional leadership strategies, and therefore, this type of qualitative study has a scope greater than understanding a specific situation (Knapp et al., 2012; Merriam, 2009; Seashore-Louis, 2012).

The merits of a particular research design are related to the research problem (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2007; Patton, 2002). According to Yin (2008), case study is a preferred methodology when how and why questions are asked. A study focused on how a principal drove improvements in student learning by focusing on social-emotional aspects of school reform fit into this category of question. Case study methodology was selected because it offers an in-depth exploration of a “bounded” system, such as a school, and offers insight about a particular phenomenon within the school (Abramson, 1992; Yin, 2008). A phenomenon such as social-emotional school reform is unique, and this study describes how a principal used social-emotional strategies. It offers significant insight about what is going on within the school. Interviews, observation, and artifacts/documents provided the best data for me as the researcher to describe the phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). When it is difficult to separate variables from the phenomenon’s context, case study is a preferred method, and is therefore popular for conducting research about schools (Yin, 2008). In the case of school leadership and improvements on
student learning, it was impossible, as others have shown, to isolate exact variables from the

given context (Farr, 2010; Seashore-Louis & Leithwood, 2012).

Given that a case study is a tool that can be used to explain how someone practices
something, it stands to reason that case study was helpful in explaining how a middle school
principal used social-emotional-focused leadership. The nature of the *how* question also gives
merit to case study methodology (Patton, 2002). The desired outcome focused me toward
seeking descriptions about the present-day circumstance of school reform using a social-
emotional focus (Yin, 1994). Knowing that the descriptions provided multiple variables that
could not be removed from the context of the particular school, I selected case study as my
preferred method (Yin, 2008). A descriptive analysis, including rich narrative about the context
of the school and its leader, was imperative for this type of study, another factor that makes case
study a solid primary method for this study’s research design.

**Research Setting**

The research study was conducted at Jefferson Middle School (JMS), an urban middle
school serving a diverse student population. The school is located in the one of the largest cities
and school districts in the state. JMS is one of six middle schools in the district and one of the
two Title I middle schools. Six hundred fifty seventh- and eighth-grade students attend the
school. Approximately 553 students, or 85% of the student body, qualify for free/reduced lunch.
JMS is located in a socioeconomically depressed community. The school has a poor reputation
related to safety and academic quality. In part, this reputation reflects the attendance patterns of
JMS students. Many students migrate from low-income elementary schools and subsequently
attend a high school that ranks in the bottom 5% of all state high schools for on-time graduation.
In 2008, the dropout rate at the high school was at an all-time high of 14%, with the on-time graduation rate at only 48%.

From 2004 to 2011, JMS experienced significant shifts in its student demographics. As illustrated in Table 1, the demographic changes between 2001 and 2012 at JMS have been significant. Today, JMS is the most diverse middle school in the city. Between the 2004-05 and 2010-11 school years, the population of White students decreased by 14%, the free/reduced lunch population increased by 11%, the Hispanic population increased by 4.8%, the Asian/Pacific Islander population increased by 6.1%, the black and multiracial population doubled, and the American Indian population was as high as 9%. In the 2010-11 school year, 28% of students at JMS were Hispanic, multiracial, or Pacific Islander.

During the same period, Jefferson experienced significant shifts in the number of students passing state assessments of student learning. In reading, Jefferson’s seventh-grade White students lagged behind the district seventh graders meeting proficiency by about 13%, whereas Jefferson’s non-White students meeting proficiency lagged those in the district by about 5%. In 2007-08, Jefferson’s seventh=grade low-income students lagged behind the low-income students meeting proficiency by 10%; however, by the 2001-12 school year that number had decreased to only 3%. In regard to English Language Learners, the number of Jefferson students meeting proficiency exceeded that of the district by about 2%. Similarly, the number of special education students meeting proficiency in 2011-12 exceeded the number of special education students meeting proficiency by 7%. In terms of the rate of reading change among non-White students, Jefferson’s students’ was 2% greater than comparable students in the district. The rate of reading change among low-income students at JMS was 3.5% greater than comparable district students.
The rate of reading change in Jefferson special education students was 13% greater than comparable students in the district.

Table 1

5- and 10-Year Comparison of JMS Student Enrollment and Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2001-02</th>
<th>2007-08</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
<th>5-Year Change</th>
<th>10-Year Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
<td>-10.2%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Non-White</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am. Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>-3.5%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>-2.8%</td>
<td>-1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% FRPL</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% ELL</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Special Education</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>-1.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data obtained from the Office of Superintendent Public Instruction, k12.wa.us

Although the overall percent of seventh grade students meeting proficiency in mathematics was low, Jefferson continued to make gains in the number of students who were proficient. During the 5-year period between 2007 and 2012, the number of proficient White
students increased by 15%. Large gains in that 5-year period were also seen in the context of low-income students meeting proficiency. However, although Jefferson seemed to have found some strategies to support non-White students in reading, the school did not make similar gains in the percent of non-White students meeting proficiency, especially compared with the district. This holds true for special education students as well. Table 2 shows the achievement comparisons over the academic year 2007-08–2011-12, including a breakdown by subgroup.

Table 2

Five Year Comparison in 7th Grade Student Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007-08 JMS</th>
<th>2007-08 District</th>
<th>2011-12 JMS</th>
<th>2011-12 District</th>
<th>5-Year Change JMS</th>
<th>5-Year Change District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>-2.5%</td>
<td>-2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>-2.4%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The dynamic changes that have occurred at JMS support the selection of this site as a focus for this study. The changing student population prompted staff to reflect on their practices and the school culture as well as to consider ways to mitigate the pressure of accountability with developmentally appropriate practices.

**Participants**

Teacher participants were selected based on their involvement in reform at JMS. The school elected staff members to the central building leadership team, and this group, along with other key staff, worked to improve JMS using an ethic of care. Staff members rotate off the leadership team every 2 years. As illustrated in Table 3, participants for this study varied in tenure at JMS and total tenure as a teacher. In addition, they held varied positions within the school. I selected participants for this study purposefully based on their participation in the school’s leadership team, their ability to discuss my work as the principal, and the role they played in the school’s work to introduce the “ethic of care” into the school’s culture.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

**Anonymous survey data.** Each of the 10 participants completed a survey with open-ended questions (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003) based on the questions shown in Table 4. Prior to providing each participant with the survey, I met with the group of participants to explain the process. The survey was sent to each participant electronically, and each participant provided a typed, response that was given to a third party to ensure anonymity. Once all 10 surveys were collected, the third party gave the collective group of typed responses to me. Each participant had approximately 3 weeks to complete the survey, and I anticipated that each participant would spend about 1 hour completing the survey.
### Table 3

**Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total Exp</th>
<th>Exp at JMS</th>
<th>Years on Lead Team</th>
<th>Role on Lead Team</th>
<th>Other Leadership Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Leads Career and College Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>ASB Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Mentor Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Transition Team Lead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Transition Team Lead &amp; AVID Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Interview Questions for Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do middle school teachers perceive that they and their principal use an ethic of care as an orientation to reform in an urban middle school?</td>
<td>- How would you describe in your own words the work that you and the principal have been doing at this middle school in the past year or two?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How is the work you are doing now different from the work you have done in the past?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- From your perspective as a teacher leader, what were the major goals for the changes that you and the principal have made to improve the culture and climate for students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subquestion 1.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Subquestion 2.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the barriers that teachers perceive they or the principal face when using an ethic of care as an orientation to reform in the middle school context?</td>
<td>What support do teachers perceive are helpful or would be helpful when using an ethic of care as an orientation in the middle school context?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Can you provide a few specific examples that represent a situation or experience that you feel required more support than was provided?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How do you perceive that the absence of adequate support created a barrier or difficulty enacting the changes that you and the principal identified?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Considering the changes that you and the principal have identified, what has the principal done to support you in adopting, implementing, or enacting these changes?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Can you provide a few specific examples that represent the support that you have found most helpful?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What has the principal done to help you address or resolve these challenges? Please be as specific as possible.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subquestion 3.</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>What evidence indicates that the ethic of care is being used in the middle school as a component of reform?</td>
<td>What impact, if any, have the changes had on your work as a classroom teacher or on your classroom generally?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- What do you think explains the impact? Can you identify a specific changes or activity that appears to be most influential? What about a change that does not appear to be influential?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How do you think the changes are influencing different student groups (e.g. higher SES versus lower SES, ELL versus non ELL, etc.)? Can you provide specific examples?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After reading the survey responses I looked for areas in which descriptions did not provide adequate detail. One limitation with open-ended questions is that it can be difficult to pull similar themes from the rich description provided by the participants (Creswell, 2007). The use of anonymous surveys, typed responses provided to a third party, reduced some of the bias within this study (Gall et al., 2003). As a follow-up, I conducted a focus group lasting approximately 1 hour with the participants and asked follow-up questions (Creswell, 2007). It is common practice at Jefferson MS to use focus groups to collect data and engage in discussions. This was a familiar format for the participants and yielded additional description through the collaborative discussion. The proceedings of this focus group were digitally recorded and transcribed.

**Documents.** I also collected documents and other school-level artifacts to validate comments and statements offered by teachers who participated in this study. As illustrated in Table 5, the documents I collected were closely aligned with the study’s research questions and included school perception surveys compiled by an outside agency from 2009-2012, school improvement plans from 2009-2012, master schedules, student journal entries, and student feedback forms from events such as transition days and retreats. The majority of the documents were retrieved from the school office.

**Analysis**

My analysis was largely an interpretational analysis, defined as “the process of examining case study closely in order to find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 466). I completed three rounds of coding. An initial round focused on the context that shaped and surrounded the work that was occurring at JMS as evidenced by documents and artifacts
retrieved from the school. For the initial round of coding, I coded documents using an open coding scheme, identifying and describing passages within these documents that illustrated the challenges and actions taken to improve the culture of the school. The purpose of this initial coding was to identify how the accountability mandates defined the scope of leadership in the school and set a context that prioritized academic improvement over the social-emotional needs of students. I found mandates, policies, and other activities that were or were not buffered by me to enable teacher leaders to have energy, capacity, and support to build this culture with students. The initial coding was primarily descriptive.

Table 5

*Documents and Artifacts Used in the Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Research Questions</strong></th>
<th><strong>Document Description</strong></th>
<th><strong>Location</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do middle school teachers perceive that they and their principal use an ethic of care as an orientation to reform in an urban middle school?</td>
<td>School perception surveys from 2009-2012</td>
<td>Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School improvement plans from 2009-2012</td>
<td>Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subquestion 1.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the barriers that teachers perceive they or the principal face when using an ethic of care as an orientation to reform in the middle school context?</td>
<td>Master schedule from 2009-12</td>
<td>Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student leadership team descriptions</td>
<td>ASB Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subquestion 2.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What support do teachers perceive is helpful or would be helpful when using an ethic of care as an orientation in the middle school context?</td>
<td>School improvement plans</td>
<td>Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master schedule</td>
<td>Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subquestion 3.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What evidence indicates that the ethic of care is being used in the middle school as a component of reform?</td>
<td>Student perception surveys from 2009-2012</td>
<td>Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student journal entries</td>
<td>Mentor leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student feedback forms from various events such as transition days and retreats</td>
<td>Mentor leaders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Round one analysis.** Next, I coded my survey transcripts and artifacts. I followed Saldana’s (2009) approach to “first round” coding. This approach involved identifying salient passages, statements, and examples that were recoded using a coding scheme that I defined *a priori.* Three major coding categories were used for round one analysis. One category was the strategies teacher leaders used to create an environment that promoted both personal and academic growth in students. Specifically, these strategies included the types of things teacher leaders did to create a student-centered school and classroom, develop a future-orientation in students, and allow students to be fully engaged in their education through decision making and time for problem-solving. The second category was barriers that impeded teacher leaders’ ability to create a student-centered culture. The third broad category in the first round of analysis comprised things that teacher leaders indicated were supportive as they created a student-centered school/classroom.

**Round two analysis.** After I completed the initial coding, I then recoded the segments identified in round one using conceptual codes illustrated in Table 6. The codes reflected central concepts from the literature related to the ethic of care, instructional leadership, and middle school reform. In this round of coding, I related the previously coded passages to the conceptual literature. This process is referred to as the “constant comparison method” (Gall et al., 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which describes the practice of referring to scholarly literature while identifying and developing emergent conceptual categories.
Table 6

*Conceptual Codes for Round Two Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>A culture of high expectations and growth (Bryk et al., 1993; Chenoweth, 2007; Boykin &amp; Noguera, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Focus on motivational inclinations of students, student strengths, and encouragement to build student confidence and ability to engage in own learning and life (Beck, 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>A place where students feel welcomed and in control of their own learning (Noddings, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Interactions between students and adults that are intentional, meaningful, and focused on student needs (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 2007; Maeroff, 1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership for Learning</td>
<td>An environment of collaboration and shared leadership (Leithwood &amp; Jantzi, 2006)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Finalization of key themes.** As a final step in my analysis, I examined the coded passages to determine which of the conceptual categories identified in the secondary coding appeared to be occurring routinely. These categories are reported as the key themes in the study. Categories that achieved “theoretical saturation” were reported as the primary themes. Theoretical saturation represents the point at which no new data are emerging in previously established conceptual categories (Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These themes are provided in Chapter 6 using a narrative that provides the reader with ample details about the school context, the leadership actions, and the thinking that guided the leader's actions.
Positionality

Given my role as the principal at JMS, I found it challenging to be both participant and researcher for this study. I addressed my role in the data collection and analysis. To mitigate this challenge, I conducted anonymous surveys that allowed participants to disclose information about my leader practices. The honesty of the answers given to the survey questions suggests that this approach was successful. As the building administrator, I had thorough knowledge of the school’s reforms and a working relationship with the staff. These were positive resources in the completion of this research. I selected participants from a very engaged group of particular staff members because I knew their work and observed their own personal and professional growth and development. The teachers had a high level of personal trust in me that mitigated their concerns about participating in interviews. The focus group was structured as a conversation about our work. However, being both the principal in this building and the primary researcher was a significant limitation as well. My own experiences caused some bias to be present in this study. I worked to constantly recognize and address these biases. Although I held a perceived power over teachers in terms of supervision, I had no primary supervisory role for any of the staff participants. In addition, I served as a participant in the action inquiry project that this case study was based on; therefore, it was typical for me to act in roles of an interviewer and observer for the purpose of gaining feedback for the group of teacher leaders.

Limitations

There are three broad limitations to the proposed research study and the case study methodology specifically. One is the issue of generalizability. Stake (2005) revealed that readers can learn a lot from the rich descriptions offered by the narrative text. Such a “vivid” portrait often can be used for evaluation for education in other settings (Eisner, 1991). However,
generalizing from the research setting to the broader world is left to the reader instead of the researcher, as the reader is the only one who can determine whether the description of what happened within the case is applicable to his/her unique context (Ericskon, 1986). In this case, given the unique culture and the process followed by staff in the school, the primary purpose was to describe the work, thereby mitigating the limitations of the case study method.

The small sample size is another limitation in this study. The question of whether this type of space could be created for an entire student and staff population was limiting for the final analysis. The primary limitation of a using a small sample is that participants in the study could be identified. I referred to participants as “participants or teachers” to protect confidentiality. I also informed the participants that their identity would be subject to disclosure, given the small sample size. I addressed both of these issues through the informed consent process as well as by explaining to participants during the recruitment process the potential risks associated with participating in this study.

Scholars have also raised issues about the reliability and validity of qualitative research, as they do regarding all qualitative methodologies. Hamel, Dufour, and Fortin (1993) argued that a lack of rigor is associated with case study particularly because the researcher has been able to select from the data sources what will and will not be described. Using a case study methodology means there is a possibility that a wide representation of data will be left out. The researcher is responsible for constructing who will be interviewed, what will be observed, and which artifacts/documents to include. Without a clear representation of varying data points, readers are left wondering whether the analysis is a valid representation of what happened (Erickson, 1986; Hamel et al., 1993). Shields (2007) and Yin (2008), however, suggested that case study is inclusive of difference and that in analysis the researcher would not eliminate
things that cannot be discounted. The very nature of case study methodology is an
acknowledgement that there are no simple, quantifiable answers. This complexity is what makes
the methodology more useful. Moreover, by utilizing a predefined coding scheme, the constant
comparison method, and member-checking my observations and analysis with participants, I was
able to mitigate issues related to reliability and validity, whereupon, I believe, the scholarly
merits of the findings are sustained.

Ethics associated with qualitative research are especially concerning, particularly when
the researcher is a participant in the study. As the primary instrument of the data collection and
analysis, the researcher relies on his/her own intuition and experience throughout the case study.
Guba and Lincoln (1981) remind us that both readers and researchers need to be aware that the
researcher is selecting from available data and can choose to illustrate whatever he/she chooses.
Reflexivity is especially important in this research.
Chapter 4

Authentic Relationships: Student Perspectives

My analysis indicates that students viewed authentic relationships as an important precursor to the establishment of an ethic of care. In this chapter, I describe student perspectives captured in written journals, reflections, and school climate surveys. These perspectives provide support for the students’ definition of authentic relationships. Based on the students’ comments, I found that these relationships had two defining qualities. First, students indicated that authentic relationships were contingent on reciprocal, two-way interactions with adults. Being in relationship did not mean simply that the students felt known by the adult. Rather, being in relationship meant that students perceived that their relationship included several two-way interactions and an orientation toward growth. Second, students further expressed that they felt authentic relationships were reflective of “being valued as an individual.” Students perceived that teachers demonstrated value toward them by setting high expectations for each student with whom they worked; creating personalized support to assist the student in meeting his/her goals; and asking and listening to students. This section presents the qualitative data findings regarding students’ perspectives with respect to these themes and patterns.

Theme 1: Reciprocal, Two-Way Interactions With Classroom Teachers

Students perceived that being in relationship with classroom teachers involved their having a reciprocal relationship with their teachers. This relationship was one that involved significant, two-way interaction between the student and the teacher. Students were free to advocate for themselves in these relationships, and teachers were free to ask students about their needs, goals, or concerns. As one student explained, “My teacher asks me all of the time what is doable when I get behind. He listens to what is going on in my life and we talk about possible
options I might have for getting things caught up.” This statement reflects the kind of two-way relationship that exists between students and teachers. Another student wrote, “When I hesitate to participate, my teachers encourage me, but don’t put me in a situation that makes me uncomfortable. They care about my success.” These student statements also indicate that teachers use the knowledge they have about students to support the student.

**Adult credibility.** It was evident that, if these two-way interactions were to contribute to authentic relationships with students, the students had to believe that the adult was interested in a genuine relationship with them. In other words, the student needed to perceive that the adult was someone who was credible. Student journal responses revealed that adult credibility is critical for strong relationships. However, comments from students also revealed the ease with which adult credibility was earned or lost.

Students perceived their teachers as being more credible when the statements or actions of the teacher aligned with the students’ experience of the teacher. When students perceived their teacher as credible, they wanted to develop and maintain a relationship with the teacher. Teacher credibility also caused some students to increase their level of school engagement. For example, an eighth-grade student wrote, “Most of the time my teachers are here and help me figure out things I don’t understand. I noticed that my grades started to get better when I came in for extra help.” As is illustrated by this student’s statement, her teacher’s credibility increased as the student took the teacher’s advice to come in for extra help. She noticed that her grades improved, which is what the teacher indicated would happen if she came in for additional help. Another student reported, “My Spanish teacher told me that if I came in she would show me how to study for our tests. Once I came in; the next time I took a test I got an A instead of a D.” Similarly, this student took the advice of the teacher to come in for extra help and to learn how to
study for an exam, and as a result her test score improved. Other students offered similar statements, suggesting that credibility with students was earned when the advice and support provided by an adult actually resulted in an improved outcome.

Other students had experiences that contrasted with the ones described above. For example, one student described a time when he was making an effort to pay attention and the teacher disregarded the effort. The student wrote,

My math teacher thinks I don’t understand math because I don’t pay attention in class. He tells me if I paid closer attention I’d understand. I listen to everything he says, but I still don’t do well. What’s the point?

The student’s writing is revealing. First, it reflects the extent to which he perceived the teacher as failing to understand his needs. For example, the student perceived the teacher’s comment about how “if I paid closer attention I’d understand” as a lack of awareness that he was paying attention. His statement “I listen to everything he says, but I still don’t do well” suggests that the student perceived that he was engaging in the classroom behaviors that should have caused him to do well, but that the teacher did not recognize that he was paying attention and chose to disregard the student’s frustration. The lack of engagement by the teacher in helping the student and recognizing the student’s efforts resulted in the student’s beginning to disengage from the math class. The mixed messages received by the student, coupled with the student’s perception that the teacher did not want to provide any help, caused the teacher to lose credibility in the eyes of the student.

Other students indicated that follow-through by teachers contributed to increased adult credibility. A seventh-grade student described her experience with a classroom teacher allowing students to select their own books to read:
I couldn’t believe that Ms. B brought in books for us to choose from. She said if we met our reading goal as a class she would let us choose the next book. Teachers say things like that all of the time and then don’t let us. But she let us choose books that we like to read. I’m reading a book about skateboarding.

The student’s comment, “Teachers say things like that all of the time and then don’t let us,” reflects past experiences in which teachers did not follow through on promises. This particular teacher gained credibility with the student because she followed through on a promise made about choosing books. When students view adults as credible, the adults gain trust, which causes students to engage more deeply and take risks.

Another student’s statement shows the perceived dishonesty and lack of follow-through on the part of a classroom teacher. The student said:

Why do teachers lie to students? They tell us we are all able to go to college, but they really don’t believe that. I heard my math teacher telling another teacher that his students are lazy and don’t get it. I hate coming in early to get extra help. One time I came early and my teacher wasn’t even here.

Students observe adults interacting with adults and infer a great deal. The student’s belief that “they really don’t believe [that we can all go to college]” was formed when the student overheard a teacher talking negatively to another teacher. This sort of experience, along with the experience of trying to get help and not having any adult there to provide support, leads the student to perceive that the teacher lies to students. The combined experiences of these students undermines teachers’ perceived credibility and highlights the extent to which the students’ perception of their teachers influenced the extent to which students developed (or wanted to develop) a relationship with teachers.
It is critical that school leaders understand the connection between the perception students have of their teachers and students’ desire to engage in school. These examples show leaders the importance of adults’ being credible to students by aligning their actions and words, following through, and being honest, at all times, when communicating with students.

**Orientation toward growth.** These young people have dreams and ambitions; they expect adults in a school to help them achieve these goals. For example, numerous journals reflected goals related to career and college. As one student wrote, “I want to graduate as valedictorian in high school. My plan to accomplish this is to do well in school.” Another student talked about “wanting to improve my grades and wanting to attend a University and major in science. Ever since I was a baby I was curious about the earth and how to protect it.” A third said, “I want to study psychology and help people. I plan to impact their lives by educating others about how to help children not get to the same place I did.” Another student described his optimal career: “I plan to take computer programming. With those skills I am planning on applying to Riot Incorporated, the creators of the games I absolutely love. Who wouldn’t want a job that also is their favorite hobby?”

Students indicated that two-way interactions that focused on their future goals caused them to feel they were in an authentic relationship with a teacher. These students held high expectations for their future and they connected with teachers who believed in their ability to meet high expectations.

**Staff recognize growth toward student goals.** Having high expectations for students, believing in students, and supporting students are all connected. Students gravitate toward adults who support them in becoming better. One student recalled asking for a specific teacher:
I went to my counselor at the end of my seventh-grade year and asked to have Mr. L. My sister had him and I knew that he really pushed her to work hard and become a better writer. I really want to be a journalist when I get done with college and I know my writing skills need work.

The student’s comment, “I knew that he really pushed her to work hard and become a better writer” showed that students are cognizant of the work teachers are doing throughout the building. In this case, Mr. L had established a reputation of pushing students and getting results. The statement “I know my writing skills need work” characterizes the student as wanting to grow. This example helps school leaders understand that when students know which areas of their lives need improvement, they often will select adults who will support their growth. A seventh-grade student went so far as to switch teachers to support her growth:

I switched advisors in the middle of the year. My first advisor told me what my goals should be. My advisor now showed me how to look at my grade report, my tests scores, and think about what I want to do in the future.

The statement “I asked to have Mr. L” and “I knew he really pushed her to work hard and become a better writer” illuminates for school leaders the reality that students who have an orientation toward growth want teachers who have a proven record of helping students learn. This idea is reinforced by the student’s commenting “I switched advisors” because the student wanted to be shown how to monitor personal progress. These two student journal entries also speak to the impact of a teacher’s reputation. Students know who the “effective” teachers are, they respect that these teachers “push them to work hard,” and they desire to be in those teachers’ classes. School leaders need to recognize the impact a teacher’s reputation has on that teacher’s ability to support and challenge students.
Several students’ writing reflected that some teachers graded on and recognized student growth. One student explained, “Mr. D always makes us go back to our last assignment. He says things like, ‘Your grade depends on whether this writing is better than last week’s writing.’ I like that he grades on how much better we get.” Another student noted, “We keep a portfolio of our work. At the end of every three weeks, we get out our work and talk about how much more we know now.” These two examples show how teachers provide opportunities for students to reflect on their current work and growth. Orientation toward growth becomes an active part of these teachers’ classrooms, and students seem to respond well: “I like that he grades on how much better we get.” School leaders need to be aware that in classrooms where adults have meaningful relationships with students, goal setting will be an active part of the class period.

**Staff members believe students will learn.** The differences between teachers who believe that students will learn and those who believe students might learn are dramatic. These students are keenly aware of the adults around them who believe in them and want to help them grow and learn. Students identify adults who do or do not believe in them based on the language and actions of the adults. One student reported:

I went back three times to ask my teacher for help. Every time he was walking out the door and told me I needed to work harder in class. Finally I just gave up. I failed the first quarter of math because I didn’t understand. I went to my advisor to figure out what to do and she said that she would help me with my math. We met every day during lunch second quarter. My math teacher accused me of cheating on one of my exams because I did so well. My advisor went to the teacher and let him have it I think because he never said anything like that again.
When the teacher told the student, “You need to work harder in class,” the student interpreted this as “I (the teacher) don’t believe that you can do this,” so the student quit and left with a failing grade and the consequences that came from it. The message received by the student from the math teacher caused the student to disengage: “Finally I just gave up.” This student had a desire to seek out the needed help by going to the advisor, who demonstrated through her actions of meeting every day during lunch that she believed the student would learn math. As the student improved, the math teacher continued to express a sense that the student would not learn by accusing the student of cheating. The math teacher’s messages, whether overt ones like accusing the student of cheating or subtle ones like “Work harder in class,” are debilitating for students. If the student does not possess the desire to persevere or absent other adults, like the advisor, the student would disengage from math.

Like this student, other students showed great determination in finding adults who would help them. One student recalled that she looked for an adult who would help her:

I failed a couple of assignments and asked for extra help from the teacher. She told me that no amount of help would fix my grade. I did not want to keep getting a bad grade; I get grounded when that happens so I had to ask a different teacher for help. I got an A on my next assignment. I was so excited.

Both of these students sought out different adults to support them because their experiences (a negative comment from the teacher and being told what to do, respectively) with particular teachers did not yield the kind of result they wanted (feeling supported with school). When teachers make negative comments like “No amount of help would fix your grade,” students can become defeated. The comments “I did not want to keep getting a bad grade” and
“I went to my advisor to figure out what to do” suggest that the students were determined to get better.

These examples help school leaders understand the importance of including students in making decisions regarding the adults who they feel will support them best. Furthermore, they illuminate the need for students to know where to go if they require additional help. These students possessed the perseverance to overcome negative adult comments and find adults who would help them. Not all students have developed this character strength. As school leaders, we need mechanisms for discerning these characteristics in students. These examples also reveal the relationship between adult comments and actions and students’ engagement level.

**Being allowed to make decisions.** Students perceived that two-way interactions were genuine when adults were credible and when they allowed the student to be part of decision making. Students also expressed that they knew adults believe in them because adults trusted them to make decisions about things perceived to be important to students. For example, one student wrote:

I went to my AVID teacher and told him that we needed a break from serious stuff. We had been in the middle of testing for about three weeks. He asked me what I thought we should do and when I suggested that we should go outside and do community building games he thought that was a great idea. He even let a few of us lead the games. We had the best day and then were so focused the next day. More teachers need to remember that sometimes they need to let their hair down.

In this example, the teacher took the time to ask the student what s/he thought the class should do. In this regard, the teacher showed students that their opinions are valued. I call this giving students voice. Other students present similar examples. With regard to decision making
about whole school things, one student said, “We were asked how things were going in the
building and when we told them that some students are really put down by teachers, they helped
us brainstorm things we might do.” In this case, the participant became a problem solver with
students rather than putting students in a passive role and telling them what to do. Another
student observed:

Some teachers take us seriously when we come to them with issues. They help us think
of real solutions, like sending anonymous notes to students who are feeling down or
celebrating nonacademic things with students so they know adults like them.

These narratives suggest that participants recognize the value of having students be part
of the solution to issues. The student comment “They help us think of real solutions” suggests
that these participants are interested in helping students develop the lifelong skill of considering
multiple perspectives before choosing one. Each of these students talked about being part of the
solution, sometimes even taking the lead.

Two-way interactions often included an exchange of information and discussion prior to
a decision’s being made. One student explained how his/her teacher provided information so
s/he could ultimately make the decision:

I am part of making decisions about school in AVID. I was in an advanced class and
having a really hard time. My teacher explained the pros and cons of staying in the class
and what my options were. We talked about what I might do and in the end, the teacher
let me make the decision.

In this example, the participant helped the student take responsibility for his/her own life by
making decisions and learning to weigh multiple perspectives before doing so. The statement
“My teacher explained the options” indicates that the participant knew it was important for the
student to have all of the information, but to make the decision. The statement “we talked”
indicates that the student felt part of a discussion about his/her options. Another student had a
similar experience talking with a staff member:

> When I walked into one teacher’s classroom they were not very nice to me. I got sent to
the office because of the way I was dressed. This happened over and over. I went to Ms.
R and talked to her about switching out of the teacher’s class and into another class. She
was pretty real with me and explained that there are people in the world that have a hard
time seeing past what someone looks like or what they are wearing. Then we talked
about all of the different things that could happen if I changed classes, good and bad. I
hadn’t thought about some of the consequences she shared like being behind in the other
class. Ultimately she told me I had to make the decision and that she would support me
with whatever I decided was best for me.

Again, the student here was given options by the adult: “We talked about all of the different
things that could happen if I changed classes.” In this student statement we also see that an
exchange of information helped the student, who acknowledged, “I hadn’t thought about some of
the consequences…” This example helps us see how two-way interaction promotes student
engagement. The student considered options presented by the adult that the student might never
have thought of or paid attention to. Students interpret this type of interaction as respectful. The
act of giving the student the ultimate decision-making power was a sign to the student that the
adult trusted him/her to make personal life decisions given the right information.

> A major component of being “in relationship” with classroom teachers is a reciprocal
interaction, a two-way interaction, that happens between the student and the teacher. Two-way
interactions contribute to authentic relationships when the student finds the adult credible.
Students perceived that teachers were invested in them when interactions were focused on their future goals and the teacher demonstrated a belief that the student would learn. Another component, decision making, also signals to students that the adult respects them as intelligent beings who, with information, can make important decisions.

**Theme 2: Teachers Value Students as Individuals**

A second theme that emerged from my analysis of student journals and written reflections related to the value the staff, particularly teachers, placed on the students as individuals. The students’ comments suggest that staff established this experience in three specific ways. First, staff challenged each student to succeed. This stance involved focusing on academics and maintaining high expectations for the students in their courses. Second, staff personalized support to meet students “where they are” and responded to their specific learning needs. Third, staff engaged in asking students questions and listening to their responses as a means of creating reciprocal interaction.

**Challenging each student to succeed.** Students perceived that teachers placed value on academics and had high expectations for them as individual learners. Students often connected high expectations, teacher belief in students, and support for expectations. Students often associated these expectations with courses they were required to enroll in during their seventh- and eighth-grade years. Students saw the courses as “challenging” and “rigorous.” In student journals, they reflected on these experiences. For example, a student wrote: “They offer challenging courses for students like me. I love that I’m with other students who will challenge me. This isn’t what I expected of middle school.” The student’s comment that “this isn’t what I expected of middle school” offers intriguing insight into the expectations that she had entering the school. The student’s comment reflects the view that middle school would be easy rather
than challenging. The fact that this student found her experience challenging was important to her and enhanced the value she felt her teachers and the school placed on her as an individual student and learner.

School leaders need to be aware of the importance of matching learner needs to courses so that each learner feels challenged. When a student says, “I love that I’m with other students who will challenge me,” school leaders understand that when learners’ needs are met, they feel valued. Placing all students in courses that challenge them appropriately seems to translate to students as “I believe you matter.”

Another student’s statement reminds us that challenging each student means different things for different students: “My teacher gives me different assignments in class because I’m in special education. They are still hard for me and the work is like other students’ work.” Having high expectations for students means you know enough about their abilities to take that into consideration as you challenge them. As a student put it:

We have to pass the State exam to get credit in this class because it’s a high school course. Mr. K won’t let us out the door with less than 95% on an assignment. It doesn’t matter how many questions you finish on the math assignment, it can be five or 10, but it has to be 95% accurate. It’s pretty cool because he knows kids like me work fast and can do more and other kids are slower, but we are all expected to meet the same expectation. When we don’t meet it, he gives us a lunch pass so we can get help. I’ve been in his room at lunch when there are 30 kids there. Everyone leaves knowing the material. This student reminds us that kids respond when teachers are clear about what students need to do, set the expectation high, and provide support. According to this student’s perspective, Mr. K was able to motivate students to work at such a high level of accuracy and engagement that they
went back at lunch to get it right. The student also saw the way the teacher made exceptions for students: “He knows kids like me work fast and other kids are slower” but did not lower the expectations. It’s a critical message for students because they understand that this teacher believes in all of the students, not just a few.

Overall, students’ writing revealed that certain teachers at JMS had reputations for challenging students to grow. The feedback and encouragement they gave students communicated these high expectations to students. One student reported, “Ms. J only shows us the highest score on the rubric and tells us that this is what grade we will be getting.” Another student wrote about Ms. J as well, stating, “She won’t let us get anything higher than the top score so I’m constantly revising. It doesn’t really seem like there is any other option. In other classes, I can just do the minimum and the teacher accepts it.” The fact that Ms. J allows students to get only the “highest score” helps us understand that teachers get particular results because they set a high expectation for all students. Ms. J was able to push students to “revise” whereas other teachers were getting only “minimum work” from the same students. This exampled demonstrates that students will work to the level of expectations set for them.

Another student offered a similar explanation, noting the impact her teachers had on her success in challenging courses: “My teachers constantly push me and set good examples of how to work hard. Without these role models, I would be completely lost and I wouldn’t be who I am today.” This student explained how high expectations from the teacher, coupled with support and “good examples of how to work hard” helped her not to be “completely lost.” This link between support and challenge is so critical that the student suggested that without them, “I wouldn’t be who I am today.”
Students acknowledged that teachers pushed them because the teacher believed so strongly in their capabilities. This belief built self-esteem and confidence in students. One student explained:

I felt like a fish out of water in my advanced math class. All of the other kids seemed to know exactly what to do and I was always asking questions because I was confused. Mr. J just kept telling me, “You’ll get it. Some kids get it right away, others figure it out after several weeks. Just stick with it.” Without that encouragement and spending every night after school I may have quit.

This narrative reminds us that teachers need to articulate their belief in students. For this student, hearing Mr. J say, “You’ll get it” and “Just stick with it” provided the push the student needed to persevere. This teacher also provided the academic support every night to help the student meet the high expectations. High expectations, teacher belief, and support were evident in the journal of another student, who wrote:

Sometimes I look around the class and think why am I here? Every time I’m about ready to quit, Ms. G hands me back a paper and says, “Look how much you’ve grown as a writer keep coming to writing club” and I think alright, I’ll keep trying.

This student acknowledged the desire to disengage—“Every time I’m ready to quit”—but the encouragement and support kept the student “trying.” These students see the hard work and availability of extra support as a sign that the teacher believes in their abilities.

Student perception is powerful and can go a long way in supporting students to meet high expectations. When students feel they are in challenging courses and when teachers communicate high expectations, student perseverance seems to be supported. Furthermore, encouragement and feedback are critical if students are to meet high expectations. School
leaders need to be keenly aware of the structures that are in place to support the development of positive student perceptions regarding teacher expectations.

**Personalized support for students.** Students expressed that in addition to wanting to feel challenged, they wanted to feel personally supported in their academic pursuits. The staff at JMS created numerous structures and programs to provide this support, including Achievement Via Individual Determination (AVID), access time, and peer mentoring, among others. Students perceived that these supports enabled them to meet the high expectations staff set for them and helped them expand their own views about what was possible for their education. For example, an eighth-grade student reflected that she was planning to go to college and that this was not something she had thought before entering the school. As the student wrote,

> I plan to go to college. I’m not sure I thought that when I came here. I wasn’t a very good student and I didn’t pass most of my classes last year. Mr. Z really showed me how to study for my classes and how to complete my work and turn it in. Every time I forgot to do an assignment he asked me for it and gave me a few more days to complete it. My science teacher won’t let me turn in work late so I had to figure out how to get it in on time. Sometimes I stay after school with Mr. Z and work on it there.

The student’s reflection is powerful in that it demonstrates how the teacher (Mr. Z) wove together high expectations and personalized support. This student’s statement helps school leaders understand that often personalized support addresses the academic behaviors that students need to learn in order to access content material. In this case, Mr. Z showed the student how to study, complete, and turn in work. The teacher also helped the student learn how to overcome barriers, like a teacher who would not accept late work, so the student would be successful in class.
Another pattern found in students’ descriptions of personalized support was teacher flexibility. Student writing reflected that students felt support was personalized because the teacher was adaptive to their needs and was willing to adjust the support if it was not working. For example, students found the school’s AVID courses particularly helpful in supporting their academic development. As one student wrote about an AVID teacher who provided personalized support:

There are 32 students in our AVID class and Ms. G seems to figure out how to get to each one of us and help us with our work. She pairs us up if we like working in groups she lets us do that. Some of the kids like to work alone and she’s cool with that.

This student identified personalization as being able to work with groups or individually. The student also explained that Ms. G “figures out to get to each one of us and help us.” This statement shows us that teachers personalize support through daily interactions with students. One student explained that this daily check-in was helpful, writing, “Ms. K is my favorite teacher. She asks us what we need help with and figures out how to get us talking to other students who understand the topic. She’s pretty flexible each day.” Students recognize that often it is not the teacher who is providing direct support; in this example, the teacher structured the class time in a way that allowed students to help other students. This type of “flexibility” feels supportive and personalized to students because the teacher responded to their request for additional support. One student recognized that the teacher was well prepared with plans for the day, but chose to meet the needs of students when necessary:

Mr. T always has these great lessons planned, I can tell because he comes in with all of these papers and charts and stuff. If one student says they are having trouble with something in a class, he gives up his lesson and figures out whether or not the rest of the
class is having the same issue. Most of my other teachers would just keep teaching regardless of whether or not we understood something.

Students notice the difference between teachers who just move forward with their plans and those who are flexible with students. Teachers who attempt to meet students’ needs, whether through in grouping strategies or altering the day’s lessons, are seen as supportive of students. Although students acknowledged that there are lessons that need to be taught (“Mr. T always has these great lessons planned”), they showed appreciation for teachers who checked in with students to see whether the plan met their needs. The comment “Most of my teachers would just keep teaching regardless of whether or not we understood something” is a telling student perspective about the degree to which staff members “care” whether all students learn the material. This attitude can perhaps be attributed to the standards movement, which causes teachers to feel they need to cover the vast amount of material expected of them instead of going deeper with content and making sure students master any standard.

**Teachers’ lack of awareness of student outcomes and feelings.** Some students wrote about support being offered in ways that caused them to feel less connected to their school experience. For example, several students wrote that they had difficulty accessing support from teachers. As one student wrote, “I asked my teacher if I could come after school to get help and he said he would be happy to ‘if I actually tried in class.’ I just quit trying after that.” This type of interaction between the student and teacher is illustrative of the kinds of exchanges that do not feel supportive to students. The teacher comment quoted here felt personal to the student because after hearing them, the student “quit trying.” The interaction was one that severed any connection the student may have felt toward the teacher. The relationship became damaged at this point.
Adults send critical messages to students about their abilities through actions. A student wrote, “My teacher puts us in groups. I have to be in the red group. You would think he would at least give us a different color then red. Everyone knows that red students are stupid.” This student’s self-perception was reinforced by the placement of students into the “red” group, which was considered the low-performing group. When teachers provide personalized support, it must be done in such a way that the student accepts the help and feels better rather than worse about his/her abilities. One at-risk student described a time when she tried to get extra support and wasn’t given credit for the effort. The student took her concerns to the principal. As the student wrote, “I stayed after school with Mr. R to revise one of my papers. When I turned it in the next day the teacher wouldn’t accept it because she thought I cheated. I was so mad I threw the paper in the garbage and went to the office.” The action of not accepting the paper followed by an accusation of cheating was damaging for this student-teacher relationship. We expect students to engage in getting help, yet when they do and produce better work, we accuse them of getting too much help. This confusing message for students causes them to get angry and throw their papers away. Such behavior is a sign of disengagement.

Support without knowing the students’ needs. Students wrote about times when the teacher appeared to not know anything about them as learners. These students described getting too much support or the wrong kind of support. The actions of staff sent subtle messages to the students that they were not valued. One student described the situation in class:

My teacher puts us in small groups. Then he works with those of us who are always off task. He reads the entire article to us and makes us do the entire assignment with him. Doesn’t he know I can read? He never asks what I need help with.
Student behavior can often cause teachers to provide support that is not necessary. In this case, off-task behavior causes the teacher to lower the expectation (“reads the entire article to us”). The student interprets such support as belittling: “Doesn’t he know I can read?” What is critical here is the statement “He never asks what I need help with.” Personalizing support requires staff to check in with students to make sure the support is actually helping. Providing the support without any feedback from the student creates situations in which expectations are lowered, too much help is provided, or students opt out of trying because they know the teacher will just do it for them.

English Language Learners noted that in general, teachers lack an understanding of how to meet their needs. An English language learner wrote:

I don’t speak English well. My teacher talks to me with big words I don’t understand. When I say I don’t get it, he puts me in the group with students who can’t read. I can read—that is not the problem. I just put my head down and don’t say anything and read to myself.

Another English language learner explained how teachers treat him like a baby:

I had a home in my country. My teacher showed me a picture of a home and pointed to it and said . . . a home is a place where you live. All I need to know is the word for the picture; I already know what its purpose is. Now I don’t ask for help because I figure it out on my own.

Both of these examples reveal teachers’ lack of understanding about the range of populations in the school. The teachers are attempting to employ strategies (placing students in groups with other student and providing definitions for words) that should, in their opinion, help the English language students. However, the students note that because the teacher has not gotten to know
them, the strategies cause them to feel like a “baby.” Personalized support requires an exchange of information between the student and the adult. It also requires that the support be meaningful and helpful to the student. Merely providing the support is not enough. The teacher must check in with the student and make adjustments to support as needed.

**Reciprocal listening.** Adult inquiry also provided opportunities for teachers and staff to identify barriers to student learning and make meaningful connections with students. In one of the journals I reviewed, I found that one of the students saw meaning in her teacher’s inquiries. The student, who was living in a shelter, saw her teacher attempt to establish a personal connection with her that made it possible for her to continue progressing academically. As the student wrote,

> My living situation demands that I get help from school. Living in a shelter means that I end up alone a lot. My teachers recognize that I need a little extra attention. They ask how I am doing, ask about my interests, and sometimes we even laugh a little bit about funny things that happen to me or them. I think most of the teachers I have are pretty dialed in to what is going on with students at home. I see them talking individually with other kids, too. I didn’t think middle school would be like that. In elementary school my one teacher knew everything about me, but we spent 6 hours together. This school has some really great teachers who figure out how to know everything about me in just 50 minutes.

The student’s comments are intriguing because they reveal that the student associated middle school with fewer personalized interactions between the teachers and students. Moreover, the student initially connected the length of time that he/she was in a classroom with the teacher’s ability to develop a relationship with him/her. Yet, as the student noted, the time
was not a determining factor in his/her relationship with the teacher. Rather, the teacher’s ability to ask questions, become familiar with the student’s life circumstances, and recognize the student’s unique needs determined how the student interacted with the teacher.

I found several statements in multiple journals to illustrate this kind of active inquiry on the part of teachers. One student wrote, “My teachers ask me all of the time how my brothers and sisters are doing.” Another student wrote, “Two of my teachers ask how church was on Sunday and ask about my how my adopted brothers are acclimating to America.” A third student wrote, “One of my teachers knows I like to tell jokes and lets me tell one every day at the start of class.” These statements reveal an important component of adult-student interaction that school leaders need to be aware of. School leaders should hear adults asking students about personal things and engaging in conversations that go beyond academic content. According to these students, such inquiry allowed them to connect with their teacher.

Another student explained that the teachers he/she had relationships with heard what he/she was saying: “My mentor advisors listen to me. They ask how last week went and what might make it better.” Listening was an important factor for students because it provided them with evidence that their teacher was concerned and invested in their success. As one student wrote, “My mentor advisor asks me about things going on in my life. She listens to me because she always is able to remember things that have been going on week to week.” Statements such as these suggest that students are perceptive about what adults hear as they are talking with students. These students also indicated that they felt adults were actively listening to talk about the students’ personal situations. For students, one sign that adults are listening is that the adult interacts with them about what they are saying and remembers the information. Such attention is an important signal that the teacher values the student as an individual.
Summary

In this chapter, I described student perspectives captured in written journals, reflections, and school climate surveys. These perspectives provide support for the students’ definition of authentic relationships. My analysis indicates that students viewed authentic relationships as an important component of school success. I presented two themes that emerged from my analysis of students’ comments: Reciprocal Interactions with Classroom Teachers, and Valuing Students as Individuals.

Students’ comments revealed that one defining quality of being in a relationship with a classroom teacher was that the interactions felt reciprocal. Students described interactions in which teachers allowed them to be part of the decision-making process. Students were able to discern when adults allowed them to make important decisions about school matters and things that would directly affect their education. Students also felt that the nature of exchanges between their teacher and them were “two-way,” meaning that the adult and student were talking with one another rather than students feeling as if they were being talked at. Student comments also revealed that reciprocal interactions often focused on helping the student develop an orientation toward growth. Students indicated that staff whom they felt they had relationships with recognized progress toward their goals. They actively found ways to talk to students about their progress and next steps. Not only did this recognition signal to students that the adult cared about them, but it also sent a message to the students that the adults believed they would achieve their goals. The extent to which a relationship developed was dependent upon the extent to which students found adults believable or credible. Students indicated that they were able to tell when adults were being honest with them. For example, adults following through on what they
said was an important indicator to students that adults were trustworthy, as was alignment between words and actions.

Students also expressed that they felt authentic relationships were reflective of “being valued as an individual.” Students perceived that teachers demonstrated value toward them by challenging them to succeed, providing personalized support, and asking them questions and listening to them. Based on students’ comments, these three things were critical for students to feel the adult valued them as human beings with feelings and thoughts of their own.

Students were keenly aware from teachers’ comments and actions whether the teachers held high expectations for them. Students indicated that some staff simply said the appropriate words, but did not follow comments up with any kind of action or support that would indicate they actually believed every student would succeed. Students' comments revealed that they met the expectations set by teachers. Some students pushed themselves simply because the teacher made them believe they could do the work. Another critical signal to students that an adult valued them as a person was the degree to which the adult was willing to provide personalized support. Students' comments revealed that often adults applied one or two strategies for support to all students. Additionally, students commented that adults who were willing to put in the extra effort engaged students at a higher level. Students perceived that adult inquiry and listening were essential ingredients in students’ feeling valued. Students reported that adults who asked questions about their personal lives and progress and then remembered what they talked about were important to them. This sort of attention contributed significantly to defining two-way interaction between adults and students.

These two themes—Reciprocal and Two-Way Interactions and Valuing Students as Individuals—are critical to students’ definition of what it means to be in relationship with a
classroom teacher. A school leader can actively look for reciprocal, two-way interaction between students and adults and provide feedback to teachers. Although feeling valued is not something a person can easily observe, the degree to which adults provide personalized support, engage in inquiry with students, and communicate high expectations with students through actions and words are identifiable.
Chapter 5

Connecting and Engaging With Students: Staff Perspectives

My analysis indicates that staff members (considered participants) viewed engaging and connecting with students as a critical component of student success. In this chapter, I describe the participants' perspectives captured from an anonymous questionnaire and a focus group. My analysis revealed that participants were motivated to interact, engage, and connect with students for two different reasons. One group of adults was motivated to engage and connect with students for the purpose of improving the academic experience. Improved academic experience is primarily defined as increased academic achievement measured by course grade and state exam scores. The second group of adults was motivated to engage and connect with students because they wanted students to have success in all aspects of their lives, wished to help students grow as people, and wanted to have an authentic relationship with students. The second group of participants defined student success as holistic and measured by a number of metrics, primarily the extent to which students met or made growth toward the personal, academic, and social goals students set.

My analysis also revealed that regardless of why staff were motivated to engage and connect with students, three conditions were necessary for adults to engage with students. These were time, authenticity, and personal connection. In my analysis I found that each of these conditions was used differently by the two groups based on their motivation for engaging and connecting with students. First, both groups of participants found extra time beyond the classroom to interact with students. Second, there were similarities in the ways in which both groups described interactions with students that were genuine and authentic. Differences existed regarding what students and adults interacted about. Third, variances were apparent in the way
participants developed connections with students. Although both groups connected around personal matters, the group motivated by holistic growth connected with students around topics of substance, such as the student’s goals for the future. Members of this group also connected with students on an emotional level. They expressed empathy toward students and a desire to better understand what students were going through.

This chapter is organized into three sections. Section one provides description of the group of participants who were motivated to engage and connect with students for the primary purpose of academic achievement. This description is followed by participants’ perspectives regarding their locus of control for developing relationships with students. Section one concludes with descriptions of how these participants used time, authenticity, and personal connections to engage and connect with students. Section two is organized similarly to section one. First, I provide description of participants’ motivation to engage and interact with students for the purpose of holistic growth. This section provides descriptions of participants’ perception of their locus of control for developing student relationships and academic achievement. The second section concludes with descriptions of how these participants use time, authenticity, and personal connections to engage and connect with students. The final section of this chapter provides a summary of the major concepts from sections one and two.

**Section One: Participants Engage and Connect for the Purpose of Academic Achievement**

My analysis uncovered a group of participants who were motivated to engage and connect with students to support the students’ academic achievement. These participants articulated that they measured academic achievement by grades and major benchmark assessments, including the state exams. In this section, I provide descriptions from participants that highlight their motivation for engaging and connecting with students. Then, I provide
participants’ perspectives about their perceived locus of control for engaging and connecting with students. Section one concludes with descriptions of the ways in which this group of participants uses time, authenticity, and personal connections to engage students in academic work.

**Academic achievement motivates adults to connect with students.** Participants expressed a desire to connect with students because they wanted them to do well academically. One participant explained, “I believe the way I interact with students, the way I treat them, defines their view of me and influences their willingness to be productive learners in my classroom.” Another participant noted, “Forming relationships with students makes my job easier and more enjoyable. I don’t have to fight with kids; many of them seem to enjoy being in my class; they listen when I give them directions.” Coming from veteran teachers, these participants’ experiences reinforce the idea that having connections with students makes it easier to engage them in class and to motivate them to work hard. Phrases such as “the way I interact with students” and “forming relationships with students” illustrate that these participants know that students respond to teachers who are relational and approachable. This inference is reinforced by the comment “The way I treat them defines their view of me.” In addition, these participants measured the impact of their connections with students through a change in students’ classroom behavior. Descriptions such as “their willingness to be productive learners in my classroom” and “they listen when I give them directions” are examples of behavior outcomes that indicate adult connections with students are having an impact. This is important for school leaders to understand because these examples show how teachers correlate classroom behaviors, such as participation, with academic achievement.
It was clear from participants’ writing and comments that they were influenced by the pressure of accountability and high-stakes assessment. One participant stated:

I tell my students that the better we get along, the easier it will be for them to learn the material necessary for them to do well on state exams. I create an “all for one, one for all” mentality in my classroom because I emphasize that it is important to me that they do well on the exam. I tell them it reflects poorly on me if they do not do well so if they like me and want to see me do well, they will work their hardest. I tell them I work my hardest to make them look good, too. In this case, looking good is doing well on the exam.

This narrative is revealing. First, it reflects the extent to which participants communicate to students the need to do well on exams. This emphasis is illustrated by the statement that “I tell them I work my hardest to make them look good, too.” Second, it shows us that teachers believe middle school students are motivated by academic performance. In this narrative, the participant explains that s/he tells students that the reason for getting along and learning is to “do well on the state exam.” This focus is further illustrated when the participant explains that his/her hard work makes students “look good” and that s/he creates an “all for one, one for all environment for students.” Third, it illustrates how this participant uses his/her connection with students to motivate them to perform. The comment “so if they like me and want to see me do well they will work their hardest” reinforces that this participant used a perceived connection with students to challenge them. Fourth, it uncovers that teachers suggest that it is important that students “get along” and “work hard” because those things will help students “do well on the state exam.” Further, it reinforces that teachers communicate to students that “if we get along and if we like each other, I (the teacher) can control how well you do on the state exam.”
School leaders need to be aware that students interpret these adult messages and come to believe that their academic achievement is directly tied to whether the teacher likes them. Believing that the locus of control is external can influence students to disengage when they perceive their teacher does not like them. In addition, these participants’ perspectives can help school leaders better understand why teachers become motivated to engage with students for the purpose of academic achievement. Some teachers tie their ability to educate students to a single metric, in this case the state exam. As an example, in the narrative cited, the participant stated, “It reflects poorly on me if they do not do well.” It is important that school leaders be aware of this mindset, for a number of reasons. One, state scores come out after students are no longer with the teacher (in the summer), and therefore teachers may not be using any metric to gain positive feedback about their work with students. Without positive feedback, teachers lose hope and energy. In other words, teachers, like students, need motivation to continue the hard work. Two, it reinforces that adults must come to understand that how students feel about them, whether or not they feel the teacher likes them and they like the teacher, is important for student engagement and success.

**Locus of control.** One of the major themes that emerged from my analysis related to participants’ belief that they would not have relationships with all students. Many participants shared a perspective that there were some students they just could not build a relationship with, that students had “burned the bridge,” or that students lacked a desire to have a relationship with them. Participants also had similar perceptions that students were the ones who made the decision whether or not to be in a relationship with a teacher. They observed that some students “accept their attempt to connect,” some students “push back and reject their attempts,” and that some students never initiated interactions with them that indicated they wanted a relationship.
This point was further emphasized as participants described students with whom they struggled to build relationships. Frequently they used nonresponsive students as a rationale for why the relationship never developed, stating that “I tried to connect with them multiple times” or “Every attempt I made never resulted in building a relationship with the student.” One participant explained:

The student I struggle to develop a relationship with I see twice per day: in AVID and in a content class. You would think that this would aid in my attempts to develop a relationship, but it has not. I try to act as positively with this student as possible, but the student is very closed off and seems apathetic to my attempts. I attempt to encourage this student, but it does not have an effect on academic performance. I believe this is the case because I simply cannot connect with 100% of my students. It doesn’t mean I stop trying, but I am realistic about this fact. I believe it is a difference in personality, background, or interest.

This participant’s narrative also reveals several points of view that support the conclusion that some adults do not perceive they control whether they have relationships with students. First, it illustrates that the adult relies on time with students, specifically unstructured time, as something that facilitates engagement and connections with students. Other participants shared the need for unstructured time with students as well. For example, one participant explained, “I have a better chance of building a relationship with my AVID students than other classes due to the fact that there is more ‘unstructured' time to focus on the whole child not just the academic part.”

The statement “The student is very closed off and seems apathetic to my attempts” highlights the participant’s viewpoint that it is the student’s fault that a relationship does not
exist. This perspective is further reinforced as the participant implies that relationships develop because “personalities, backgrounds, and interests” are similar or compatible. When the participant indicates that despite initiating positive interactions and encouragement the student is still “closed off and apathetic,” the participant’s true sense seems to be, “Nothing I can do will help change this student’s personality and therefore I cannot have a relationship with the student.”

It is also important to note that the participant’s comment, “I attempt to encourage this student, but it does not have an effect on academic performance,” reveals that the evidence of a positive student connection is only academic. This singular focus results in educators missing different social-emotional evidence that a connection is starting to develop. Educators focus feedback and encouragement on academic things and miss opportunities to connect on an emotional level with the student.

Finally, and most telling, is the statement “I simply cannot connect with 100% of my students.” Although the participant insists that s/he will continue to attempt to connect, this statement shows school leaders how a lack of teacher belief around what is possible for and with a student impacts the student’s engagement with adults and school. The participant who shared his/her perception noted that there is a “better chance” of developing relationships with students during unstructured time; this statement also illustrates that some teachers consciously believe that there are students with whom they will not develop a relationship. This viewpoint brings to light that some educators perceive having relationships with students as something that is, at least to some extent, out of their control. While they put effort into making time with students, being authentic, and engaging on a personal level with students, they ultimately believe that there
is a 50/50 “chance” that any of their efforts will result in their having a relationship with a student.

These perspectives provide critical insight into why some teachers have relationships with students and others do not. School leaders are not unaware of this dynamic in their schools, but understanding the ways teachers interpret student actions as messages about whether students want to connect with them allows them to support teachers differently. Teachers have great misunderstandings about middle school students’ actions, and clearing up misconceptions will go a long way in helping teachers engage with students.

**Conditions necessary for engaging and connecting.**

**Time.** My analysis revealed that as a result of their desire to support students in terms of academic achievement, participants broke time into two distinct categories: academic time and relationship time. Participants’ descriptions of interactions with students indicated that they talk about academic issues or about personal topics, but rarely about both at the same time. Participants are intentional in working to build connections with students and do so in two different ways: at the beginning of the year with the whole class and in brief one-on-one interactions with students.

**Relationship time with students at the beginning of the year.** Participants expressed that getting to know students at the beginning of the school year was critical. Participants reported that they “take time to learn about students at the beginning of the year instead of digging right into curriculum and rules/expectations.” One participant expressed a belief that “Our teachers work very hard to develop relationships and trust among their students and make a conscious effort at the beginning of the year to establish this.” Another participant voiced that:
The administration was very proactive at the beginning of the year at allowing teachers time to get to know their students before jumping right into the curriculum. We were given time to learn about our students and work on fostering some sort of relationship, which was wonderful. This was a time when I really got to know students and learn about who they are and their interests, which helped lead to closer relationships as the year progressed.

Statements such as “take time to learn about students at the beginning of the year” and “our teachers work very hard to develop relationships and trust among their students” show that participants share a view that getting to know students is critical in their classrooms. This belief is further emphasized by the statement “We were given time to learn about our students and work on fostering some sort of relationship, which was wonderful.” Opportunities for students to build a sense of community with their peers and teachers cannot be underestimated as a key component of a successful school culture.

This “getting to know you” time is characterized as learning about students’ personal interests and then teachers getting “back into the curriculum.” This dynamic illustrates that participants see relationship time as being “completed” after a set of activities has concluded. One participant described this perspective thus: “We do getting to know you activities and teambuilding games to build relationships.” Another participant reported, “I spend time at the beginning of the year so I don’t have to spend time rebuilding community later in the year.” When school leaders give permission at the beginning of the year for classrooms to build community, they inadvertently communicate to their staff that this is comparable to building relationships with students. Some teachers have come to believe that creating a relationship with a student is synonymous with building classroom community. This is a critical misconception.
The misconception that building classroom community and creating relationship with students is the same thing is further demonstrated by the participant’s statement that this time helps to “foster some sort of relationship.” This statement implies that this participant is making a conscious effort but is unclear about the end goal as it relates to building connections with students. Participants collect this personal information about students, but coupled with a lack of vision about what kind of relationship they want to create with a student, participants default to having the “relationship” be about academics and do very little with the personal information other than occasionally check in with students.

**Brief one-on-one interaction as a way to connect.** In terms of students in poverty and who have experienced trauma in their life, such as many Title I students, participants have learned that regular contact and attention are important to encourage student engagement. These participants explained that consistency and quick “check-ins” were signals to students that the teachers cared about them. One participant noted, “Once students are working, I go around and check in with students.” Other staff members meet students at the door for a “check-in” each day. A participant said, “I walk around my classroom and touch base with every group every day. I am very intentional about making personal contact with tough students every single day.”

Phrases like “all students” and “every group” are important indicators that participants know that they need to show every student personal attention so students know they are important to the teacher. Descriptors such as “every day” show that participants understand the importance of consistency. The actions of “checking in” and “greeting every student at the door” are signs that these staff members understand the importance of their daily presence in their students’ lives.
Brief one-on-one interaction was a common strategy participants used to connect with students throughout the year. Participants associated a quick check-in with developing a “connection” with students. For example, one participant stated:

On a daily basis I make sure I’m connecting with all of my students as I monitor their progress, clarify directions, explain the mathematical concept, or check in with them on how they are doing on their work or how their day is going.

This participant described monitoring “progress, directions, mathematical concepts, and work completion” as part of connecting with students. The act of monitoring appears to be limited to one person looking over another. In this sense, monitoring is not an interaction in which two people exchange ideas, feelings, thoughts, and opinions as they would in an authentic relationship. Many participants described this type of monitoring. For example, a participant explained, “I use data from the students’ exit slips the day before to determine which students I need to check in with the next day.” In this example, the participant monitored the students’ academic progress and used this information to determine whether s/he will check in with a student. School leaders need to be aware that not all students are connecting with their teacher each period. This is important because in middle school students likely see six different teachers each day. If every teacher does not check in with every student, it is possible for a student to progress through the entire day without any teacher connecting with him/her. In this example, only the students who had academic struggles the day before would check in with the teacher. A participant’s explanation that monitoring students in class allowed him/her to connect with the most “needy” students further emphasizes the point that students can be missed.

School leaders need to know that teachers may articulate that attention and consistency are critical for developing student relationship. In these examples, teachers achieve consistency
by establishing structures for checking in and providing attention to some students. Consistency and attention in this sense do not mean every student every day. As is true of adults, not all students can quickly connect with an individual. Past experiences, lack of trust, or social immaturity may mean one person needs more time with another to build understanding, trust, and a relationship. In brief one-on-one interactions, students who quickly relate to the teacher are able to connect with him/her, and those who cannot do not build a connection with the teacher and never engage in the course as the teacher would have hoped.

Furthermore, it is important to note that these brief interactions do not provide the time necessary for a student and teacher to get to know each other through exchanges of opinion, ideas, and feelings. This is important for school leaders to understand because the pressure of academic accountability often causes educators to narrow the time spent with students to include only academic achievement.

**Relationship or content focus.** Participants described teaching classes and developing relationships as two things they do separately from one another during the day. Participants’ descriptions revealed a sense that “unstructured time” offered a better opportunity to build connections with students than did content class time. One participant explained, “I consider myself to be at somewhat of an advantage developing relationships because I teach an activity-based curriculum that allows me to interact regularly with all of my students on a personal level.” This participant’s comment suggests that it is difficult for staff to interact regularly with all students during content courses but that activity-based classes allow teachers to move around and talk to students. Another participant shared a similar perspective: that being part of an unstructured program such as “AVID afforded me the opportunity to build relationships with students.” These participants’ statements reveal that some educators focus their efforts with
students on one thing at a time and have difficulty balancing academics and relationships in one class period. I define this perception as *compartmentalizing time*. Participants indicated that they build relationships with students during “music events, athletic events, or other non-academic time.” This suggests that participants view their presence at an event as an act that builds relationships with students.

Compartmentalizing time was emphasized by one participant in describing a typical teaching day:

I love teaching two different types of classes. I teach AVID, which is all about talking to students about progress, and I teach social studies, which is where learning happens. In my social studies class I focus on academic things and do not interact much with students except if they are misbehaving or request help. It allows me to really focus on the most needy students. In AVID, I can talk with students about how their behavior is helping or hindering their academic success. This is really a great time to develop relationships that help academic success.

This perspective is telling. It shows us the difficulty some educators have creating a vision for working with students beyond academic achievement. This participant contrasted one course with another, saying that “AVID is all about talking to students about progress” whereas “social studies is where learning happens”; this differentiation suggests that the participant believes students do not learn from discussions other than content ones. This perception reveals a major gap that exists in education around how students learn and what is important for students to learn. Middle school students are at a critical developmental time in which they are acquiring and practicing a variety of academic skills as well as social and emotional skills and knowledge.
By separating relationship time and content time, we can miss critical opportunities to help students learn about relationships.

This participant also suggested that his/her teaching style is such that s/he does “not interact with unless they misbehave or need help.” This behavior is concerning on a number of levels. First, it reveals that students could go through their entire year having few interactions with a teacher unless they are disengaged students or need help. Further, it emphasizes that interaction between student and teacher is not seen as a necessary component of learning. Additionally, it reinforces for students that the only way to get teachers’ attention is to be disengaged or to need help. It cannot be overemphasized here that all students, especially those from poverty, those who have experienced trauma in their lives, and middle school students, need attention. Positive attention and feedback are proven motivators for students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Marzano, 2003).

**Authenticity through honesty.** My analysis revealed that participants believed that being authentic with students was important for engaging and connecting with students. They used words and phrases such as “honesty,” “brutal honesty,” “showing them reality,” and “exposing them to the real world” to define authenticity. Participants seemed to focus all conversations with students on how academic success would benefit students in the future. For example, one participant explained, “I was the first person to tell a student that they read at a second grade level. We have a great relationship because I was honest.” Another participant asserted, “You have to be real with students because many of their teachers haven’t been. They respect you when you are honest with them about what level they are at.” These participants show us that they perceive that being honest with students about their academic performance helps the participants engage and connect with students. Another participant observed:
Middle school students have no idea how the real world works. They think that if they are kind and nice people will let things slide. I have one student who comes back after school and tries to help me clean up because she thinks I will overlook her late and missing assignments. I tell her all the time that their bank isn’t going to allow her to pay her bill late because she offered to clean up the bank. I think she responds to me and likes me because I relate things back to the real world.

This perspective reveals several things. First, it shows us that participants think middle school students are disconnected from the “real world.” This participant defined the real world as adult experiences such as “paying bills.” Second, it shows that participants perceived that students were not authentic or honest in their behavior toward the participants. In this instance, the participant suggested that “They think that if they are kind and nice people will let things slide.” This view is concerning because it means adults are focusing their attention on trying to figure out what the motive is for the student behavior rather than on the student. It is also concerning because the adult makes assumptions about the student’s motivation, which may cause the adult to connect differently with a student. In this instance, the participant perceives that the student is coming after school only because she wants the teacher to excuse missing work. The participant does not seek to understand why the student is coming after school and why she turns in missing work because the participant believes s/he already knows why. This example shows us why adults often misunderstand students. Third, this participant also expressed the opinion that the student “responds to me and likes me” as a result of this authentic dialogue.

It is important for school leaders to take note that misunderstandings between students and teachers stall development of deeper connections with students. School leaders need to be
aware that some adults are not seeking to understand students’ deeper reasons for their behavior. For example, this participant made assumptions about the student’s motivation and applied a particular type of support or intervention as a result. When the support offered does not help the student, the possibility exists that the student will give up or stop trying to engage with the teacher.

**Personal connections.** My analysis uncovered that participants defined a personal connection as gathering or sharing information that was personal in nature. They talked to students about family, general interests, and hobbies. Many of the participants reported that they gave “inventories” at the beginning of the year to help them build personal connections with students. The inventory required the student to write down answers to questions participants asked about family, general interests, and so forth. All of the participants related that they told students about their own experiences in school, and many emphasized that they told students “how hard they worked” to be successful. These examples all represent one-way communication. The student or the teacher provides information, and the other party may or may not respond to the other individual. Participants perceived that because the information was not academic, it allowed them to connect with the student. These participants’ misunderstanding of what it means to connect with a student contributes to an ongoing pattern of one-sided communication rather than facilitating interactions that cause two individuals to understand or relate to one another.

The importance of teachers relating to students contributes to students’ perception of whether they are “liked” by a teacher. One participant remarked:
I know at least one student who dislikes a particular teacher because they feel as though the teacher “doesn’t care what I do and doesn’t like me.” This student now does nothing in that particular class and is not encouraged to participate. Students want teachers to relate to them and understand them. This is seen as being “liked” by a teacher or “cared about.” Middle school students may take on a persona that they don’t care if the teacher likes or dislikes them, but at the core of every human being is the desire to be accepted and liked by others (Beck, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003). This participant’s perspective regarding how students disengage reveals the influence a teacher has over whether a student engages in school. The student reported that the teacher did not care about what s/he did and did not like him/her. The participant’s disclosure that the student then was unwilling to participate reinforces the notion that a sense of connection with the teacher is critical for student engagement.

For school leaders, this means that school culture and school systems must promote connections between students and teachers. It also means that school leaders must place greater emphasis on how students feel about their teachers.

**Section Two: Engagement and Connections for the Purpose of Developing Relationships**

My analysis uncovered a different group of participants who are motivated to engage and connect with students for the purpose of building authentic relationships with students to support their holistic growth and success. Participants defined *holistic* in terms of habits of mind, academic skills, advocacy skills, character and leadership traits, and other social-emotional development. They also reported that students rather than adult-determined benchmarks “define growth.” This section begins with descriptions of participants’ motivation for engaging and connecting with students. I provide examples of how these participants leave nothing to chance
when it comes to developing relationships with students and therefore feel a great sense of control in building relationships with students. This section concludes with examples of ways in which participants used time, authenticity, and personal connections to deepen their relationships with students.

**Genuine desire to impact a student’s life motivates relationship.** These participants’ comments suggest that the participants had a genuine desire to impact the lives of all children. They made comments such as, “It’s my mission to support students so their dreams become reality” and “I believe that the way I support students changes the outcome they will have in life.” One participant described the importance of expanding students’ definition of success beyond academics. The participant elaborated:

> I asked students at the beginning of the year what was something they were proud of. I was amazed at how many students couldn’t come up with anything or shared something academic, like a good grade or passing an exam. I was also surprised that many of them expressed pride in things they could not control, like a baby brother or sister. It was important for me to help my students see their great achievements beyond academic ones. So every day we start class with a daily recognition. Every student gets recognized within a month and then we start over. I’ve worked hard to research things I could recognize about them besides school stuff. I talk to their friends, call their families, and attend some of their events outside of school. Their faces light up when I share something that they didn’t think I knew about them.

The participant is motivated to support the development of the social-emotional side of students, which is evident in the way the participant does “research” on the student to find out about unique or interesting achievements. Students in a class such as this would sense that the
teacher cares about how students feel about themselves. The participant’s statement “It was important for me to help my students see their great achievements beyond academic ones” is compelling. The statement “Their faces light up” also shows that some educators look for an emotional reaction from students as evidence that their interaction impacted the students.

Another participant emphasized the desire to evoke an emotional response:

While teaching goal setting, I can also get a general picture of what she wants to do with her life and get a glimpse of her dreams as she sets goals for her personal life. In addition, I was able to really build a relationship with this student by participating in our multicultural night in April. I was assigned the Vietnamese group and felt so blessed to be able to work side by side with her as she shared her story of moving to the United States with her family. She beamed as she participated in sharing her story about moving to the United States with her family. It was such a proud moment for her.

The participant explained that, “she beamed” and “It was such a proud moment,” which reinforces that some educators look for emotional responses in students, not just behavioral and academic responses or results, as a desired outcome. In addition, phrases like “I felt so blessed” remind us that these participants are gaining something from being in relationship with students.

The participant emphasized that s/he worked “side by side” with the student, revealing that educators looking to develop authentic relationships with students are not simply on the side watching but are actively involved in supporting students in endeavors beyond the classroom. This point is further emphasized by the fact that the participant sought to deepen the relationship with the student by participating in a multicultural night at the school, an event that honors students’ culture and allows educators an opportunity to interact with students about matters of the heart, such as “sharing a story of moving to the United States with her family.”
These perspectives help school leaders understand that some educators who are motivated by student results beyond academic ones look for emotional reactions from students rather than relying on a metric, such as an exam score or a change in behavior. One participant noted, “My relationships with students are positive, rewarding, and reciprocal,” which demonstrates for school leaders that these educators gain something from being in a relationship with students and that they believe that students also gain something positive from being in the relationship.

**Nothing left to chance.** My analysis revealed that one of the greatest differences between the participants in this group and the group motivated by academic achievement was the degree to which these participants felt responsible for developing, improving, and sustaining relationships with students. These participants stated, “It’s up to me whether or not students have a relationship with me” and “It’s my responsibility to make sure every one of my students is in a relationship with me.” Statements such as “The question isn’t whether or not I will have a relationship with students, it’s about what kind of relationship it will be” further emphasized this sentiment. One participant explained the priority s/he placed on building relationships with all students:

> In my first few years of teaching I waited students out. You know, I kind of tested the waters to see if they wanted to connect with me or not. Now, after several years of teaching experience, I realize having relationships with students is too important to leave as an optional thing, like an activity that someone does. Every day I talk to every student I have about something that’s important to them and I actually listen to them, not because I want to offer some kind of advice or solve their problem so we can get to the business of learning the content.
This participant’s statement reminds leaders that not all educators come into the profession with an understanding of the importance of relationships. The statement “In my first few years of teaching I waited students out” reinforces the notion that some educators are hesitant to take the first step. This hesitance may be due to a lack of confidence in their ability to build connections with students. The comment “I kind of tested the waters to see if they wanted to connect” further indicates that some educators believe that it is students rather than teachers who determine whether the two will be in relationship.

This participant’s reflection that his/her priority changed after several years of teaching is telling. Leaders need to understand that an educator’s lack of connection with some or all students may be due to not prioritizing relationships with students and that this may change with experience and time. This awareness is critical because it implies that school leaders can support educators to reprioritize building relationships with students and help them develop a greater sense of control over whether a relationship will exist with a student.

This participant also reminds leaders that the concept of a relationship with a student must go beyond climate or team-building activities. The statement “like an activity someone does” reminds leaders that some educators associate relationships with students with activities rather than with actions such as “talking and listening,” as this participant noted.

These participants reported that they are persistent with students. One participant admitted, “Sometimes I have to really work at a relationship with a student. Students can be reluctant for a number of reasons.” Another participant stated, “One time I made it a point to find the student four times a day, just to notice them and be around them.” Participants explained that when students “shut down” they gave them “space,” but they never allowed students to opt out of the connection. One participant explained:
I had a student who would refuse to talk to me. He would literally put his head down every time I asked how it was going. It would have been easier for me [to] just let him be and hope that some other adult in the building had a relationship with him. I’m too stubborn for that, so I just kept at it. Every day I would keep trying. Finally one day he said, “You aren’t going to leave me alone until I talk to you, are you?” And I told him no. Sometime later in the year he told me that no one had ever kept trying like I had to talk to him.

This participant described his/her desire to keep trying to connect with students as being “stubborn,” while other participants said they were “determined to break through.” The relentless determination to be in relationships with students is a characteristic that leaders need to look for and encourage in teachers.

Persistence and determination are absolutely critical characteristics for middle level educators to possess. This participant reaffirmed that it takes longer to connect with some students. The student in this example was trying to wait out the adult to avoid the relationship. This story brings to light the importance of giving educators time with students—a quandary for middle level educators at JMS because they have just 2 years to connect with students.

**Conditions necessary for engaging and connecting.**

**Making time with students.** Participants felt that they were able to be in relationships with students when they devoted time to being with students beyond what they perceived as a professional expectation. They perceived that it was necessary to be present in the lives of students on a consistent, regular basis. Participants reported that making time to be with students was critical for student success and building relationships with students. One participant observed that staff members would “go the distance and stay after school to help a struggling
student.” The perspective that staff members “go the distance” indicates that they are committed to doing whatever it takes to make sure students have success in school.

Participants also indicated that students in poverty need adults who are willing to be part of their lives. One participant explained:

Most adults in their lives are unpredictable. Sometimes they develop a connection with a parent’s boy/girlfriend and then that person is gone in a few weeks. What our kids need are adults, teachers, who are willing to stick with them unconditionally, regardless of whatever mistakes they make or sometimes how they treat you.

This participant revealed a desire to be a significant adult in these students’ lives. This teacher’s willingness to stick with students despite being treated poorly at times demonstrates an understanding that making time for students means being there no matter what. The importance of making time to talk or interact with students around both personal and school-related topics resonated with participants. For example, one participant explained, “It’s actually very simple: you have to talk to them—when you pass them in the hallway, when you have time in your class, whenever you get the chance.” The statement “You have to talk to them” is critical because it emphasizes that adults must take the initiative to use the time they have to interact with students.

Other participants acknowledged that time is not always spent doing schoolwork; as one put it, “Staff find time to listen to a student that needs to talk.” Another participant explained:

One day I had to stop teaching because there were just so many students in my classroom that had other things they were dealing with. One student was crying about being evicted and another was sharing that their mother had been put back in jail. Sometimes there are days when students just need the space to talk about the things that are going on in their lives that are more important than science.
This participant’s narrative is revealing. It shows how this teacher is able to consciously set aside content teaching to address students’ social-emotional issues. Participants who are motivated to engage and connect with students for the purpose of holistic growth seem to reconcile the need for academic achievement and their desire to help students with their development as a person. This participant also understands that students are people. The comment “Sometimes there are days when students just need space to talk about the things that are going on in their lives that are more important than science” shows school leaders that these teachers recognize that people’s need to address what feels critical in their lives must take precedence over other matters at times.

**Authenticity through verbal and nonverbal feedback.** Participants indicated that they make it a point to find different ways to show they care about and are interested in students’ success. Many participants used terms such as “praise,” “giving students space,” and “understanding” to describe why they thought students wanted to engage and connect with them. These participants were aware that students, especially middle school students, have a sixth sense that picks up whether an adult is being “real” with them. As one staff member put it:

Relationships are actually very simple, but you can’t fake them. Students want someone to pay attention to them, to show interest in them, to check in with them, but they don’t want someone to fake it. And they know when the teacher is faking it.

The phrase “faking it” seems to be a reference to talking to students out of obligation rather than genuine interest. Connections are built from authentic desire to know another individual. The participant expressed that students want someone to “show interest in them” and to “pay attention” to them. When adults do this genuinely, students see it as a sign that they matter to the adult or that someone cares about them.
One participant reported developing relationships with students by giving a lot of verbal feedback—for example, “giving lots of praise and specific encouragement about challenges they’ve overcome or academic success they’ve achieved.” The way in which participants recognized students also shows they value students as human beings. Recognition included praise, awards, and other forms of feedback to students. In the majority of participants’ responses, they intentionally looked for ways to recognize students beyond academic success to demonstrate value for the student. One participant said that s/he “read the paper so I could comment about the band’s first place finish before the student had to say something.” Several participants mentioned that they attended sporting events and music events specifically so they could connect with students afterwards. Participants were aware that a component of recognition is “seeing it” before the student points it out. The phrase “before the student had to say something” shows that this participant knew it would make the student feel valued if the teacher brought it up first. School leaders need to understand that staff who attempt to demonstrate an authentic or genuine desire to be in a relationship with students are keenly aware of what is going on in the lives of their students.

Many participants described nonverbal feedback they provided to students through their actions. When a teacher’s treatment of a student is influenced by the teacher’s knowledge of the student’s life, students appear to feel valued as individuals. One participant gave this example:

I know that this student is dealing with some issues at home; however, I am not privy to these circumstances. She is currently working with the counselors. Because I know this student is struggling, I try to be kind and gentle with her. However, she still remains withdrawn in class. One-on-one, I have had some successful interactions with this student.
The teacher expressed that his/her interactions with the student shifted as a result of what the teacher knew about the student: “Because I know this student is struggling, I try to be kind and gentle.” Participants showed they valued students by being cognizant of how interactions went with students and making adjustments as needed. Another participant explained that, based on previous interactions, “It is my goal to not engage when this student is mad, to speak calmly about where we can go from here, give options for how to proceed, and give them space to regroup. I also continue to interact with this student.” This participant noted that the student had “begun to do more work for me and trusts that I will offer support.” The participant acknowledged that s/he approached this student with great intention: “It is my goal not to engage when this student is mad.” Phrases such as “give options and give them space” indicate that the participant knew the student needed time and choices. School leaders need to help teachers understand that teachers’ reactions to situations, whether with words or actions, and their willingness to change their course of action signal to students that they are valued as individuals.

Participants revealed that they knew they were real with students because the student responded positively. School leaders need to be aware that positive student responses provide evidence to teachers that a connection has been developed with a student. One participant explained, “These interactions turned into these students seeking me out to tell me something that they did over the weekend, new members of the family, etc.” The juncture at which a student initiates interaction with the teacher is a critical piece of evidence that signals to the participant that the student received the teacher’s feedback positively and felt a connection with the teacher. One participant observed, “Our relationship is developing, which is demonstrated by him seeking me out to discuss his day.”
Developing personal connections through two-way interaction. Participants perceived that being in a relationship with a student required that they have a personal connection with the student. Having a connection meant the student and participant interacted about personal things. It also meant the teacher had gained an understanding of the student and that the student sought the teacher out for support and interaction. One participant described attempts to connect with a student:

I interact with him by talking to him . . . about what he did over the weekend, how he’s doing in his other classes, what his plans are for high school and college, how the band did in the parade, what did he think about the movie we’d both seen, or what did he think of the book I loaned him.

The phrase “I interact with him” is revealing because it describes a two-way exchange between the participant and the student. Connections are made because both the student and the participant are involved in the interaction. The connection develops because the participant asks for the student’s opinion about things they have in common, like the book and the movie. Another participant shared a connection made with a student because he was involved in something personal for the student:

I had a student who had a goal of becoming an Eagle Scout. He didn’t have a father in his life and his mother worked really long, late hours so they rarely saw each other. He was frequently frustrated that his mom forgot to sign off on his activities. I told him that I thought it was cool he wanted to be an Eagle Scout and that I wanted to learn more about all of the incredible things he was doing. We met every week and he spent an hour telling me about everything he was working on. I learned so much that I started to encourage some of our boys to start the process.
This participant took enough time to engage in a conversation with the student and therefore knew what the student’s goals were. The participant also had enough exchanges with the student to know that the student’s mother was not home very often and that the student was frustrated. What is particularly telling in this narrative, however, is that it shows school leaders that these participants are trying to learn from students as much as they are expecting students to learn from them. The fact that the teacher was willing to spend an hour outside of the school day each week connecting with the student demonstrates the extent to which teachers will go to build personal connections with students.

These participants explained how they used two-way interactions to build connections with students. Their interactions went beyond asking the student about personal things and sharing their own personal stories with students. These participants expected interactions to have meaning for both the student and them. School leaders need to be aware that these teachers put a great deal of emotional investment into the interactions they have with students.

Summary

In this chapter I shared analyses of adult participants’ perspectives regarding what motivated them to engage and connect with students. My analyses revealed two distinct motivations for engaging and connecting with students. The first group was motivated to engage and connect with students for the purpose of furthering academic achievement. They perceived that being strongly connected with students resulted in greater student engagement and resulted in increased academic achievement. The second group was motivated to engage and connect with students to develop a relationship with them. This group took a holistic approach to working with students in that they hoped to impact the social-emotional growth of students as well as their academic achievement.
I revealed the locus of control for both groups of participants as it related to engaging and connecting with students. The first group was externally motivated by academic achievement scores. The first group desired to be in relationships with all students, but expressed a belief that they did not think it was possible to have relationships with every child. They explained that students were not necessarily willing to have relationships with them or that sometimes personalities were not good fits. The second group, on the other hand, placed great pressure on themselves to be in a relationship with every student. This created an internal locus of control. They made it a priority in their work and indicated that the need to have a relationship with every student was not negotiable.

My analysis uncovered that time, authenticity, and personal connections were viewed as conditions that contribute to engaging and connecting with students. My analysis revealed that the two motivations for engaging and connecting with students influence the ways in which participants use the conditions of time, authenticity, and personal connections. The group motivated by academic achievement took time at the beginning of the year to establish connections with students. They tended to do this as a whole class by using leadership games or surveys to get to know their students. My analysis uncovered that these participants compartmentalized time into two categories: academic and relationship. Although these participants focused on both, they indicated that it was difficult to do so simultaneously. They also perceived that brief one-on-one interactions with students were sufficient for developing relationships with students. The second group of participants, who were motivated by holistic student development, spoke of spending consistent, meaningful time with students. They described talking and listening to students individually in addition to “climate building” activities they did to promote class community.
Both groups of participants expressed a desire to be authentic with students. Authenticity was described by the first group of participants as “being real” about the realities of the world with students. They described this communication as being “brutally honest” with students. The second group described authenticity as an adaptive quality they used to meet the needs of students. In other words, they were authentic because they genuinely attempted to meet the needs of students. They also shared a common value that students were human beings and should be treated as such. This value caused them to interact with students in an authentic manner, similar to the way they would with an adult with whom they had a close professional relationship.

As with authenticity, both groups viewed building personal connections as important, but had significantly different definitions of what it meant. The first group of participants described talking with students about personal topics, such as their interests, family, and so forth. They expressed a desire to have students know them on a personal level as well. The second group described personal connections as interactions. These two-way interactions benefited both the student and the participant and had meaning for both.
Chapter 6

Findings and Implications

A large body of research suggests that an ethic of care in schools is a critical component of middle school student success (Aljose & Joyner, 1990; Kohut, 1990; Lightfoot, 1983; Noddings, 2007). In this study, I define care as taking responsibility to help another person grow academically, emotionally, and personally (Beck, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Starrat, 1991). I examined how a group of middle school teachers perceived they and their principal used an ethic of care as an orientation for providing greater support to students. I examined the perspective students had on authentic relationships at the school along with the perspectives of ten teachers who engaged in school reform using an ethic of care.

This final chapter provides key findings from my research. These findings are followed by discussion specifically related to school leadership. I conclude with the study’s limitations and a section on the practical significance of the study.

Key Findings

All participants in this study held a belief that there is a relationship between student engagement levels and the connection students have with their teachers. They also indicated a desire to be in a relationship with as many students as possible. My analysis indicated that a teacher’s motivation or desire for connecting and engaging with students created differences in that teacher’s perceived ability to connect with all students, the teacher’s classroom routines and structures, and the ways in which the teacher measured student success.

In this study, an ethic of care was discernible in the motivation teachers had for engaging and connecting with students. Members of one group of teachers were strongly motivated by academic achievement outcomes of their students. They perceived that by engaging and
connecting with students they would be able to motivate those students to work harder and make greater academic gains. Members of the other group of teachers were motivated by the overall holistic development of students. They perceived that they could influence student growth toward many kinds of goals, including academic ones, by developing meaningful relationships with students.

Regardless of their motivation for engaging and connection with students, both groups of teachers employed an ethic of care as a means of developing strong relationships for the purpose of supporting student growth.

**Two Ways an Ethic of Care Manifests in Classrooms with Teachers**

Many classroom teachers who were strongly motivated to support students’ academic achievement outcomes articulated a connection between their treatment of students and a student’s willingness to be a productive learner in their classroom. Many of these teachers indicated that students respond differently to teachers who are relational and approachable. Despite having a strong internal desire to promote greater levels of student engagement, some of these teachers mentioned that they were influenced by the pressures of the accountability movement. The pressure to improve student performance was alluded to by one teacher, who went so far as to tell students that it reflected “poorly on me if they do not do well.” It is no surprise, then, that these teachers had difficulty blending content teaching and relationship building during a given class period. Commonly, teacher responses indicated that teachers had difficulty making time for connecting with students in a meaningful, personal way during their content classes. If they taught an “unstructured course” they felt they were better able to develop relationships with students.
Unexpectedly, I found that these teachers expressed feeling as if they had less control over whether they would be able to have a relationship with every student. One participant commented, “In my first few years of teaching I waited students out. You know, I kind of tested the waters to see if they wanted to connect with me or not.” This statement indicates that some teachers allow students to have a choice about whether they will engage in a relationship with the teacher. Other participants provided examples of students “pushing back their attempts to connect” or “coming across apathetic.” My analysis revealed that these teachers interpreted greater academic engagement by the student as evidence that a student was willing to connect with them. One participant commented, “I attempt to encourage this student, but it does not have an effect on academic performance.” For these participants, improved academic achievement was a significant measure that students were responsive to their care efforts. Typically, this achievement improvement was seen in grades and standardized test scores.

My analysis also revealed that these teachers described brief interactions such as “monitoring” as a strategy to check in with students. For example, these teachers would “walk around and touch base with every group every day, greet every student at the door, and check in while students are working.” They placed great importance on giving every student brief personal attention every day and using academic achievement data to determine with whom they might need to spend greater amounts of time. Participants described monitoring as checking “work completion, addressing questions, and providing clarifying directions.” In this sense, it appeared that these teachers looked over a student’s progress and checked their engagement level. The action of monitoring was seen as a way of connecting with students, and the degree to which students were engaged and making progress appeared to be evidence to these participants that students were willing to work with them.
The other group of participants was motivated by a strong desire to influence the broader, holistic growth of students. Holistic growth included academic achievement but also included personal and social-emotional growth. These teachers saw a connection between their encouragement of students and greater student confidence to do a number of things. Many of these teachers expressed that the way they supported students changed the outcomes for their students' lives. Although these teachers had a strong desire to support academic growth of students, their greater goal was to expand a student’s definition of success beyond standard achievement scores. During this study I found that these participants rarely mentioned academic achievement, accountability to another adult, or standardized exams. This was a notable difference between this group of a participants and the group discussed previously. In general, these participants’ responses reflected great attention to how students were feeling about themselves and school.

My analysis uncovered that these participants frequently let students participate in defining their own “growth.” Frequently this was done in the form of goal setting. In cases where students were not defining the outcome for their growth, it was largely due to low expectations of themselves, and the teacher felt they needed to communicate that the student could reach higher levels of success. These teachers were able to challenge the student’s belief about themselves in this way because they actively worked side by side with students in classroom work and endeavors beyond the classroom. Several participants shared stories of working with students on special projects not related to their classroom work. Although participants shared examples of working outside of the classroom with students, it was clear that they did so because they gained something from being in a relationship with the student. These participants said things like, “I feel blessed” and “It was a proud moment.” They found joy in
seeing students’ faces light up when they celebrated success beyond academic scores. Terms like “rewarding,” “positive,” and “reciprocal” were common in these participants’ responses.

When discussing relationships with students, all of these teachers stated that it was their responsibility to ensure that students had a relationship with them. I found their responses indicated a desire to adapt and respond to student need. Teachers reported that often they had to really “work” at having a relationship with some students. Their persistence could be identified in the multiple times they found students throughout the day to connect with them, an awareness that students sometimes shut down and they would have to wait them out, or a reluctance to allow the student to opt out of engaging with them. One teacher defined this stance as being “too stubborn” to let the student disengage. Another participant defined this unwillingness to give up as persistence. My analysis revealed that stubbornness and persistence were part of the equation and that having a clear understanding of how to read student behavior, knowing the developmental process of adolescents, and having an understanding of the impact poverty and trauma play in a person’s life were also critical pieces that contributed to these participants’ ability to develop relationships with students. Together, knowledge and determination created in these teachers a level of confidence that they could develop a relationship with any student that was not as strong in the other group of teachers.

These participants looked for time with students that would allow them to engage in two-way interactions with students in which students were able to make decisions and advocate for their needs. I expected that these teachers would also indicate that having content classes and less structured classes with students was important. Surprisingly, these teachers indicated that they intentionally structured their classroom time in a way that allowed them to engage in deeper conversations with students. Simply, they spent less time in front of the whole class and more
time working with small groups and individuals in their classes. Participants spoke openly of occasionally putting content learning aside because something in a student’s life was more important than whatever they were supposed to learn that day. It is important to note that these teachers were able to leverage this balance of personal and academic time with students to challenge students academically. In other words, the academic gains in these teachers’ classrooms for all students was high.

Whereas the group motivated by academic achievement looked for academic results and engagement in the classroom as a measure of a successful connection or relationship, these teachers looked for an emotional response in students as a means of measuring student engagement. They looked for students’ faces to light up, for small acts like returning to the teacher to talk or a student sharing a small piece of personal information as signs that the student was beginning to feel comfortable and connected with them. One teacher described a situation with a student who simply put his head down every time s/he approached him. One day the student commented that the teacher would not leave him alone until he talked with him/her. The participant saw this as a positive sign that the student was beginning to engage with him/her. Participants reported that in their experience, this relentless willingness to stick with students unconditionally seemed to be most supportive to students and caused them to engage more frequently and deeply.

**Leadership Structures and Conditions Supportive to Teachers**

Both groups of participants needed the support of their leader to create the conditions and structures necessary to engage in an ethic of care. Both groups needed a sense of “permission” to connect with students around topics beyond academics. The teachers heavily motivated by academic achievement were concerned with having permission to take time at the beginning of
the year to build relationships with students. Several communicated an appreciation that the administration was willing to let them set curriculum aside so they could get to know students at the beginning of the school year. This group of participants expressed that it was easier for them to engage and connect with students when they had them for both a content course and a less structured course.

For the second group of participants, “permission” translated to knowing that their school leader understood there would be greater time spent in small groups and one-on-one with students in their classrooms. They also wanted school leaders to understand that in their classrooms there would be times when social-emotional issues took precedence over academic matters. These teachers focused on ensuring that students understood they (the teacher) had a deep belief in their (the students’) ability to meet high expectations. For example, one teacher said, “It was important for me to help my students see their great achievements beyond academic ones.” These teachers looked for emotional responses as evidence that their efforts to engage and connect with the student were supportive of student growth.

One barrier that teachers faced when trying to build relationships with students was time restrictions. My analysis showed that both groups of teachers were interested in having time with students that allowed them to get to know and connect with students on a regular basis. My analysis revealed that time restraints were a greater barrier for teachers motivated by academic achievement. These participants expressed that they felt pressure from the accountability movement to focus on content to maximize student achievement growth. Teachers felt pressed to cover a great amount of content with students so the students will meet the standard. Whether teachers had students for a content course and an unstructured course, for longer periods of content time, or kept students for 2 years, being responsible for fewer students and seeing them
more often during the day allowed teachers the opportunity to engage and connect with students in meaningful ways.

**Ways an Ethic of Care Manifests Through Students’ Eyes**

A student’s perception of whether a teacher likes him or her matters. It alters the course of success for some students. Students are perceptive about hidden messages in teachers’ words. Multiple students shared examples of comments teachers had made that caused them to disengage and feel as if they were not liked by the teacher. For example, one teacher commented to a student, “No amount of help would fix your grade.” This statement communicated to the student that the teacher did not care enough about the student to help the student figure out how to get a better grade, and that the teacher did not care enough to even engage in a conversation about the grade. Students’ responses indicated that these kinds of words, combined with a lack of follow-through on the part of the teacher, caused them to think that the teacher did not like them. Many stated that they “just quit” and decided to “just give up.”

When students felt a teacher was relational, they sought out more opportunities to be around the teacher. This perception even caused students to ask to be in these teachers’ challenging courses. They sought out staff who they knew would help them even when their core teacher would not. They spoke highly of teachers who challenged them and provided appropriate levels of personalized support. A special education student commented that his/her work was challenging and looked like the other students’ work. Many students agreed that teachers demanded high levels of performance from them and said that the teachers’ belief in their abilities to meet the expectations caused them to want to succeed.

Another theme that resonated in students’ responses was that teachers who treated them like a person, who valued them as individuals, and who let them be part of decision making
about their own lives caused them to feel good about themselves. These were the characteristics of teachers whom students perceived as liking them. As a result, the students went to these teachers in time of need and celebration. They worked hard for these teachers and they were willing to be challenged academically because they were in a relationship with a person who they feel would not steer them down the wrong road.

Discussion

A large body of research has led to the conclusion that a student’s performance in middle school contributes to that student’s success or failure in high school and beyond (Balfanz & West, 2009). Yet middle school reform efforts do not address fundamental challenges within middle schools and middle school classrooms (Felner et al., 1997; Jackson & Davis, 2002). In this study I examined how a group of middle school teachers perceived they and their principal used an ethic of care as an orientation for providing greater support to students, which impacted student performance. I examined the perspective students had about authentic relationships at the school along with the perspectives of ten teachers who had engaged in school reform using an ethic of care. Interestingly, I found that within this group of teachers there were two very different motivations for supporting student growth that led to different classroom practices and levels of support for students. The different motivations prompted me to examine leadership actions as a possible explanation for barriers different groups of teachers faced as well as structures and conditions that promoted the presence of relationships between teachers and students.

The overall message of the results is that school-level leadership matters and can impact how and whether teachers engage and connect with students. Teachers who were motivated by academic achievement in students articulated feeling greater pressure from the accountability
movement, which altered how they spoke and engaged with students. These teachers used narrow NCLB definitions of student success, academic test scores, and grades as measures to determine their effectiveness in building relationships with students. Using these measures contributed to their levels of confidence and desire to persist with students, a finding corroborated by the work of McGuinn (2012) and Noddings (2007). These teachers articulated the pressure they felt to raise achievement outcomes for students. Teachers who were motivated by the holistic development of students spoke of a greater need for understanding by the school leader of how they run their classrooms. These teachers allowed students to determine a definition of growth and success, and they used emotional measures to determine their effectiveness in building relationships with students; these choices contributed to their confidence in building and persisting with students. Effective Schools and Effective Middle Schools research clearly established that having high expectations and standards is critical, and it also asserts a need for an environment that cultivates interpersonal relationships and personal relevance (Clark & Valentine, 1981; Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte et al., 1974; Madden et al., 1976; NMSA; 1982; Weber, 1971).

Grounded in these data is evidence for the theoretical stance that instructional leadership needs to include relationship pedagogy. The concept of instructional leadership is widely discussed in the education literature (Glickman, 2002; Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood & Duke, 1999). Hallinger (2005), however, notes that the concept is poorly defined in the literature. As a result, instructional leadership has come to be about the quality of teaching and learning as well as the engagement of staff in efforts to improve teaching and learning (Knapp et al., 2012). This study supports the notion that instructional leadership needs to be inclusive of the student environment necessary for teaching and learning to happen. School leaders need to help
establish and communicate a vision for the school that includes high-quality relationships with students (Felner et al., 1997; Fullan et al., 2006; Lipsitz, 1982). In so many middle schools we have sacrificed relationships for a focus on academics. Yet research shows that one does not improve without the other (Farr, 2010; Fullan et al., 2006).

One of the most important things school leaders can do is help define what is meant by quality student-teacher relationships. Opportunities to build relationships can then be designed based on this definition. School leaders can provide professional development for staff members based on their needs, which can become part of teacher training specific to middle-level teaching (CCAD, 1989; NASSP, 1985; NMSA, 1982). Adults then have a supportive environment in which they can learn and practice how to be in a relationship with students. Professional development and a definition of student-teacher relationship will also help adults to be mindful of the language and actions they use with students. Several examples shared by students indicated that adults often created further disengagement through an action or phrase they used with students. With a common definition, schools would be able to discuss viable evidence that is accepted for the existence of quality student-teacher relationships. Evidence would include the students’ achievement outcomes along with their personal growth and development. This focus on the individual’s goals toward his/her mastery shifts the current paradigm from a focus on standardized test scores to one of multiple pieces of evidence to show student achievement (Boykin & Noguers, 2011; Linnenbrink, 2005; Murphy & Hallinger, 1993).

A second and equally critical action that school leaders must take is a stance that student perceptions of their teachers matter a great deal. The ethic of care calls on educators to suspend their judgment and focus on the promotion and development of students as people (Beck, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Starratt, 1991). This revised focus means that structures must
be put in place to help students share what they are feeling about their school experience. The learning environment must be distributed and share responsibilities with students and staff (Acker-Hocevar et al., 2012; Knapp et al, 2010; Spillane et al., 2006; Starratt, 1999). Teachers must be willing to listen and accept the information in a way that causes them to act. This shift will create a quandary for leaders as they hear about particular teachers who are not meeting students’ needs. Courageous leadership focused on having difficult but necessary conversations with adults about their treatment of students will be necessary, as will a willingness to take a stand.

The findings of my study indicate that students engage at greater levels in an environment that is centered on interpersonal relationships and personal relevance. Students articulated that personal relevance often is associated with their future-orientation. Based on my findings, I believe it is critical that we create personalized learning environments for students. Such environments place students in control of their own learning (Leadbeater, 2001; Tomlinson, 1998) and support students in their motivation to learn (Farr, 2010; Leadbeater, 2002; Lipsitz, 1984). Communication in the classroom and outside of the classroom allows for discourse and debate through honest, respectful interactions with every student (Beck, 1994; Knapp et al., 2012; Noddings, 1988; Theoharis, 2009). Schools and teachers need to focus on the development and care of human beings (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 1984). This focus would require school leaders to hold conversations with staff about how to balance system expectations with the desire to be in relationships with students (Rorrer & Skrla, 2003).

Moreover, my study found that teachers had difficulty implementing developmentally appropriate strategies in their classrooms. Developmentally appropriate strategies focus on the contextual conditions in which teaching, learning, and engagement happen (Darling-Hammond,
One of the most complex developmentally responsive strategies is fostering the ability of adults to meld a student’s interests and perceptions with current skill levels required of the curriculum (Stewart, 2006, 2008), and school leaders need to spend a great deal of professional development time focusing on this strategy. A great deal of research has been conducted on the importance of counseling and advising programs in middle schools because they are inclusive of developmentally responsive strategies for adolescents (NMSA, 1982; Valentine et al., 2004). The implementation of programs inclusive of teachers being involved as advisors will give teachers the time to support students outside of their content instruction. These personalized learning environments have high expectations for students. Lee and Smith (1999) included personalized support for students to reach high standards as a necessary component of Edmond’s (1979) description of cultures with high expectations. This research was further emphasized by Chenoweth (2007), who found that expectations were not just stated by school personnel but were found in their supportive actions. In middle schools, research shows that school structure and organization influence an atmosphere of excellence regarding academics and self (NMSA, 1982; NASSP, 1985; CCAD, 1989).

Limitations

This is a study of one school. This research is not intended to be generalized. This, however, does not mean that because this case study is limited to these participants during a specific period at JMS that the understandings are limited in scope (Adelman, Jenkins, & Demis, 1976; Wehlage, 1981). The issues surrounding engagement and connections between teachers and students are pertinent to other people and places. I drew from a group of teachers who I knew perceived themselves as relational teachers. I cannot say whether the results would have been similar had a different group of participants been selected.
My role as a school leader limited this study as well. I felt that I needed to use protocols that would allow teachers to feel as safe as possible in their responses. Therefore, I confined my methodology to anonymous responses and one focus group. In addition, I did not use students actively in this study. Instead, I chose to use archived student journals as a means to gather student perspectives regarding relationships with adults. As a result I did not conduct observations that might have contributed greatly to the findings in this study. This omission provides an avenue for future study.

There are several caveats regarding the findings of the present study. Time is one of the most significant limitations to this study. Because I was limited by time, I was unable to ask direct follow-up questions of staff to better understand how they balance accountability with developing student-teacher relationships. More time in the field was necessary to actively listen to the perspectives of students. Future studies that involve more than one school, a broader range of students, and an extended timeframe would provide more depth in our understanding of how relationships develop between students and teachers. The cross-sectional analyses limit interpretation of the findings because individual student perspectives were not matched with their teacher participant perspectives. This type of study would help us better understand whether teachers and students perceive the relationship in the same way. It would also provide excellent data for school leaders and teachers to use as a means of understanding how students interpret the actions of their teachers as compared with teacher intentions.

**Theoretical and Practical Significance**

This study has theoretical significance, adding to the body of research on what is known about effective middle school practice. We can learn a lot from the Effective Schools research we have abandoned as a result of NCLB. Effective Schools research provides a framework for
middle schools that includes high expectations and rigor with developmentally responsive practices. Schools demonstrated that with full implementation of the framework, academic achievement gains were made. We need systems for determining whether students develop as citizens, become leaders, and are happy with their experiences. These two things, the framework and the evidence, will provide schools with valuable tools they can use to create a concrete school improvement plan.

This study also contributes to what is understood about instructional leadership by offering clear findings that support the necessity of relational pedagogy as part of instructional leadership. This study was designed to contribute to a better understanding of how school leaders can help create a school culture that focuses on relationships while at the same time holding high expectations for students. This study describes two manifestations of ways in which teachers connect with students. Both require support of the school leader. The research frequently separates instructional leadership from servant leadership, moral leadership, or even shared leadership. Some advocate for instructional leadership that emphasizes a focus on classroom instruction. Others advocate for shared leadership that focuses on leadership for learning and the creation of a culture of shared learning (Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012). Barth (1990) believes that the role of the principal should be one of a learner who models what it means to connect with students and learn with and from them. Sergiovanni (1992) explains the need for stewardship in leadership and servant leadership. He states that the leadership that matters in the final outcome is the kind that touches people. This kind of leadership appeals to people’s emotions and values and responds to people’s connections with other people. This study supports the notion that these are all complementary approaches and necessary (Marks & Printy, 2003; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012).
In this study, both groups of teachers made connections with students. The two manifestations of teachers’ connections with students suggest that the school leader’s role does not have to be one of changing behavior but rather one of helping teachers understand what they are doing to build relationships with students. In this way the school leader helps the teacher see how the teacher’s actions cause students to behave and engage. The school leader then leads the teacher to be a learner and empowers the teacher to do what makes sense as long as the teacher’s behavioral choices are inclusive of the values of the school.

This study is of practical significance in shaping the direction of middle schools in an age of high stakes accountability and narrow measures of student success. This study highlights the need for school leaders to attend to important aspect of school culture as part of leadership. Scholars who examined middle schools also found that principal leadership was essential for the school climate and culture if schools are to meet the needs of all learners and have shown that both the culture and the climate of the school were two of the significant factors in school improvement (Alexander & George, 1981; CCAD, 1989; Clark & Valentine, 1981; NASSP, 1985; NMSA, 1982). The most recent studies indicate that the programs that emphasize helping students set goals focused on gaining competence, improving effort, and improving personally are associated with high academic gains (Ames, 1990; Friedel et al., 2010; Walker & Greene, 2009). These types of programs affect the culture of the school and set a tone of improvement and growth across the school community.

This study also illuminates the reality that students will reach high academic expectations for teachers with whom they connect. School leaders need to spend more time focusing on developmentally responsive approaches to interacting with students and instruction (Beane, 1990). Developmentally responsive strategies focus on the contextual conditions in which
teaching, learning, and engagement take place. Using such strategies changes the interaction between adults and students in the learning environment (Beck, 1994; Maeroff, 1990). The quality of the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students is significant for positive student outcomes (Borman & Overman, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Iruka et al., 2010). Instructional leadership then must focus on the use of developmentally appropriate strategies with students, both in the classroom and in the school as a whole.

Finally, this study also contributes to further thinking regarding teacher and principal preparation programs. Teacher preparation programs must strengthen a student’s ability to develop connections and build relationships with other people, particularly the students the educator will teach. Noddings (2005) argued that teacher preparation programs must push beyond teaching content knowledge and how to deliver it in a classroom. I agree and argue that our secondary teacher preparation programs lack significant training about the importance of teaching the whole child. Principal preparation programs must broaden the definition of instructional leadership to include the importance of student-teacher relationships as a critical component in classrooms. Additionally, principal preparation programs must create a definition of leadership that includes instruction, relationships, service, and learning. In studies of leadership over the decades, we have shifted from one definition, such as servant leadership, to a different definition, such as instructional leadership (Marzano et al., 2005). I argue that leaders must be able to lead with all four of these components in mind (Marks & Printy, 2003).

**Conclusions**

In the course of this study I have had unexpected revelations that have broadened my thinking in several areas. Through this research I have gained four perspectives that have changed the way I think about school leadership, school culture, student and teacher motivation,
and student-teacher relationships. First, I have gained awareness that school leaders have a great deal of influence over whether a teacher will develop a relationship with a student. I hope this study will help others look at how they can positively influence whether student-teacher relationships develop in a new way and invite them into greater dialogue about quality professional development for leaders and teachers. Second, the students’ portrayal of everyday conversations they have at JMS, as well as teachers’ portrayal of the conversations they have with students at JMS, have helped me to think about middle schools as communities raising children. The ways we interact with one another, the ways we treat one another, and the value we place on one another have a far greater impact on our students than we may believe. I have learned that analyzing small interactions focused on how individuals create a climate offers a critical vantage point for understanding school experiences different from what we might expect. I hope this research will help others think about our school system in a way that shifts the emphasis from academic outcomes to students’ actual experiences in the school. Third, I have learned that motivation is a powerful tool that impacts the ways teachers design experiences for students. I have learned that whatever motivates teachers to engage and connect with a student impacts everything from a lesson plan to how the teachers interact with students. When external mandates and the pressure of accountability become the motivator for educators, we see shifts in how teachers go about engaging and connecting with students. I hope this study causes others to think differently about the emphasis we place on the things we value and opens the door for conversations about how schools help students become motivated to engage in school and other aspects of their lives. Finally, I have learned that the term “relationship” in education means different things to different people. Although we have clearly defined the academic outcome for our students, we have not defined what we mean by relationship. I have also learned that having
standards and outcomes for student-teacher relationships in education is as necessary as having standards for academics. I hope this study will help others to think about standards for student-teacher relationships and the outcomes we desire in a more specific way.

This study uncovered a group of teachers who were motivated by student development. They were able to put aside curricular demands to meet student’s social-emotional needs and further students’ social-emotional development. Further research needs to be conducted to determine how and why some teachers are able to balance external accountability demands with being in relationships with students. This insight would help school leaders better understand how they can support other teachers as well as provide valuable insight into the characteristics of teachers who may be best for middle school teaching roles.

Being able to develop relationships with students is not a fixed attribute of a teacher. Further research needs to be conducted to help school leaders understand how to best support teachers in developing relational skills. The need for school leaders to know how to foster a teacher’s ability to build relationships needs to be part of administrative training programs. A key component of teacher training programs must be developing the relational skills of teachers.
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_Evaluation Practice, 15_, 283-290.

Research Study Consent Form

Study Title: Rethinking Middle School Reform Using an Ethic of Care: A Case Study of an Urban Middle School

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Sponsor:

You are being asked to take part in a research study carried out by Chad Lochmiller, Brenda McDonald, and Michele Acker-Hocevar. This form explains the research study and your part in it if you decide to join the study. Please read the form carefully, taking as much time as you need. Ask the researcher to explain anything you don’t understand. You can decide not to join the study. If you join the study, you can change your mind later or quit at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of services or benefits if you decide to not take part in the study or quit later. This study has been approved for human subject participation by the Washington State University Institutional Review Board.

What is this study about?

This research study is being done to explore the perception of classroom teachers who are working in an urban middle school. The study examines how teachers perceive an urban middle school principal balances the pressure of federal and state accountability while serving the developmental needs of middle school students.

You are being asked to take part because you have been a member of a team of teacher leaders at a particular middle school that have been engaged in focusing school reform beyond standardized student achievement scores.

Taking part in the study will take about 2 hours.

You cannot take part in this study if you are not a member of the teacher leadership team that has been working on school reform in this middle school or if you are under 18 years of age.

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What will I be asked to do if I am in this study?
If you take part in the study, you will be asked to:

- Answer questions to an anonymous questionnaire about your perceptions of the work that has been going on at this middle school. This should take approximately 60 minutes.
- Participate in a focus group that will allow the entire group of participants to dialogue with one another about your work.
- The questionnaire you will be answering will include questions that allow you to express what obstacles you have faced in doing this reform work, supports that have been helpful, and your perception of how the work has supported students.
- At any time during the questionnaire or focus group, you may withdraw from participation in this research study.
- The school improvement plan, master schedule, student journals, and school perception data will be collected and used as part of this study. The documents will be analyzed prior to the questionnaire and focus group so that specific questions about the documents can be posed to you.
- The focus group will be digitally recorded for transcription purposes.
- The results of this study will be compiled and provided to Washington State University. The results could be used in discussions of middle school reform in professional journals and newspapers.

Are there any benefits to me if I am in this study?
The potential benefits to you for taking part in this study are: You have been engaged in this work for over two years. The benefit of this study is that the entire team have the opportunity to answer questions about their practice, the support they receive from their school, and the needs they have for further support. You may find this opportunity to reflect upon their practice beneficial.

This study focuses on school reform in a holistic, caring way. The study will produce evidence that can be used to guide reform efforts. This information might influence practice in schools and thus the educational opportunities afforded to middle school children. This research could influence the ways in which school principals re-focus a school's efforts from solely being about standardized academic achievement.

Are there any risks to me if I am in this study?
The potential risks from taking part in this study are:

1. Physical harm or discomfort: The questionnaire will be delivered electronically using your personal desktop computer or laptop. Computer use has been associated with fatigue, eye strain, and minor physical discomfort. The questionnaire instrument has been designed to be completed in 20-25 minutes and you will be allowed to save their responses and return to the questionnaire in the event that they are unable to complete the questionnaire.
(2) Psychological/emotional discomfort or stress: If you have not previously participated in a research study you may feel nervous, uneasy, or anxious. You will be fully informed of their rights as a research participant via the informed consent process. Finally, contact information for the PI, CO-PI's, and WSU IRB will be provided should you have questions or need concerns addressed. You will be able to opt out of the study at any time without penalty.

(3) Significant time or inconvenience: You may feel that participating in a research study is a significant time commitment and/or inconvenience. You will be able to opt out of the questionnaire, interview, or focus group at any time without penalty.

Will my information be kept private?
The data for this study are being collected anonymously. The data for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by federal and state law. No published results will identify you, and your name will not be associated with the findings. Under certain circumstances, information that identifies you may be released for internal and external reviews of this project.

- Data for this study will be kept in a locked file cabinet inside of a locked office
- Chad Lochmiller, Brenda McDonald, and Michele Acker-Hocevar (researchers) will have access to the data.

The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous. The data for this study will be kept for 3 years.

Are there any costs or payments for being in this study?
There will be no costs to you for taking part in this study.

Who can I talk to if I have questions?
If you have questions about this study or the information in this form, please contact Chad Lochmiller at (509) 372-7242 or Brenda McDonald at (509) 994-6234. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or would like to report a concern or complaint about this study, please contact the Washington State University Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-3668, or e-mail irb@wsu.edu, or regular mail at: Albrook 205, PO Box 643005, Pullman, WA 99164-3005.

What are my rights as a research study volunteer?
Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to be a part of this study. There will be no penalty to you if you choose not to take part. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

What does my signature on this consent form mean?
Your signature on this form means that:
- You understand the information given to you in this form
• You have been able to ask the researcher questions and state any concerns
• The researcher has responded to your questions and concerns
• You believe you understand the research study and the potential benefits and risks that are involved.

Statement of Consent
I give my voluntary consent to take part in this study. I will be given a copy of this consent document for my records.

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant                      Date

_________________________________________
Printed Name of Participant

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands the purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and potential risks of participation.

I also certify that he or she:
• Speaks the language used to explain this research
• Reads well enough to understand this form or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her
• Does not have any problems that could make it hard to understand what it means to take part in this research.

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent          Date

_________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

Role in the Research Study
Anonymous Survey Questions

1. In general how would you describe the relationship that exists between teachers and students in this school? Please be as specific as possible.

2. Think of a student you have a strong relationship with. Describe how you interact with this student: How did this relationship develop? Why do you believe this relationship has developed? What have you done to facilitate this relationship?

3. What have I, the building principal, done to facilitate your relationship with the student described in question 2? Are there actions I have taken that have enabled you to develop a relationship with the student?

4. Think of a student you are struggling to develop a relationship with. Describe how you interact with this student: How is this relationship developing or not developing? Why do you believe this relationship has developed the way it has? What have you done to facilitate the relationship?

5. What relationship do you think your colleagues have with students? Are their relationships similar to those you have? If yes, how so? If not, why not? Describe the interactions between your colleagues and students that you have observed that support or illustrate your thinking.

6. How could I, as the building principal, help your colleagues develop relationships with students? Please provide specific examples in your response.

7. What do you think influences the relationships that you have with students in this school? Please provide specific examples in your response.

8. How do you think students view teachers and staff in this school? What do you think shapes or defines their view? Please provide specific examples.

9. Please share anything else regarding relationships you think would be helpful for me to understand.