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UNDERSTANDING THE PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate College of
Arkansas Tech University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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It has been the honor of my life to pursue knowledge and learning in an effort to make some small difference for my students, my community, and our world, but I recognize the impossibility of it all without the people who have loved me best along the way. I believe without any doubt that God has intricately designed these plans He has for me and placed each person in my life for a purpose, and for that He deserves all the glory.

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Abstract

UNDERSTANDING THE PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

Studies have shown the positive associations between academic achievement, student engagement, and student-teacher relationships (Willms, 2003; Roorda et al., 2011). However, limited research exists on the subject of student-teacher relationships from the student perspective, and virtually no literature focuses on student-teacher relationships from the student perspective in the southern United States. This qualitative study was designed to collect and examine the perceptions of African American high school students in Arkansas on the development of student-teacher relationships. Data was collected through focus group meetings held with African American students in two diverse high schools. The constant comparative method of data analysis was applied to the transcripts of focus group meetings in an iterative process of developing codes, identifying patterns, and establishing themes (Glaser, 1965). While there were several valuable pieces of learning identified in this study, there were four key findings: everyday, meaningful experiences are important in building relationships between students and teachers; teachers should be proactive in understanding students individually and culturally; racism, discrimination, and stereotyping continue to be common experiences for African American high school students; and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2019) serves as an adequate framework from which to examine student-teacher relationships. The findings of this study have implications for teachers, school leaders, and educator preparation programs, and future research can benefit from the conclusions of this study.

Keywords: student-teacher relationships, African American students, Self-Determination Theory

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Chapter I: Introduction

As this study sought to explore the perceptions of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships, this chapter addresses the background of the problem, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, key definitions, significance of the study, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and organization of the study.

Background of the Problem

Concern over American underperformance in academic achievement has resulted in a national focus on achievement; considerable research has been conducted in an effort to understand the factors that promote successful academic performance (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Hattie, 2008). Student engagement, which can be defined in a multitude of ways but simply put is the "extent to which students are involved in, attached, and committed" (Li & Lerner, 2013, p.20) to school, has been identified as having a strong positive relationship with achievement (Willms, 2003). When students are engaged in school, their academic achievement improves. A central theme in the research on student engagement is the importance of positive student-teacher relationships (Roorda et al., 2011; Conner & Pope, 2013). There is a clear connection between positive student-teacher relationships and student engagement, which points to the value of relationships to improve engagement and, consequently, achievement.

Positive student-teacher relationships have been found to increase student engagement and achievement, improve students' psychological well-being, and decrease students' at-risk behaviors (Cornelius-White, 2007; Joyce & Early, 2014; Wang,

Brinkworth, & Eccles, 2013). On the other hand, though, negative student-teacher relationships can lead to the inverse of those benefits and become detrimental to student success (Dods, 2013; Osterman, 2010). The potential advantages of positive student-teacher relationships as well as the consequences of negative student-teacher relationships make relationships between students and teachers an important topic of study.

Several factors have been examined for their role in contributing to positive student-teacher relationships, including student demographics and teacher demographics, among others (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Krane et al., 2016). Yet, the research on minority student academic achievement and behavioral trends, where African American students typically score lower on standardized measures of academic achievement and receive higher numbers of discipline referrals than White students (Schott Foundation, 2012), highlights the need for further analysis in regards to race or ethnicity and student-teacher relationships. A predominantly White teacher workforce is educating a nation of students of which almost half are non-White (NCES, 2013), which raises the question of how race might influence the relationships between students and teachers.

Statement of the Problem

As the student population in America continues to grow more diverse, the teacher workforce remains consistently White, with around 82% of American teachers identifying as White (NCES, 2013). Research has shown the benefits of positive student-teacher relationships and the potential consequences of negative student-teacher relationships, which makes the dynamics of race in the development of student-teacher relationships worthy of more extensive analysis. Several studies exist that explore the

student-teacher relationship in general, especially from the teacher perspective (Kahn et al., 2014; Krane et al., 2016); however, there is limited research on the student perspective of the relationship, even less information available on the African American student perspective, and virtually none outside of urban and coastal areas of the country (Bottiani et al., 2016). The current body of literature does not include the African American student perspective on the development of relationships between students and teachers in the rural South; this study sought to address this problem.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships. In line with the goals of phenomenology, this study intended to make sense of the phenomenon of student-teacher relationships and understand the different realities of each participant as they experienced and perceived the development of relationships with teachers (Merriam, 1998). The following research question guided this study:

- What are the perceptions of African American high school students regarding the development of student-teacher relationships?

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this qualitative study, key terms are defined as follows:

- Black/African American – identifying as a descendent of African lineage (Lasker-Scott, 2015)
- High School Student – student currently enrolled in grade 10, 11, or 12 in an Arkansas public high school

- Mentorship - a positive relationship between a non-parental adult and a young person (Baker & Maguire, 2005)
- Teacher – classroom instructor responsible for designing and delivering instruction on-site at one of participating high schools
- Engagement – "the extent to which students are involved in, attached, and committed to the academic and social activities in school" (Li & Lerner, 2013, p.20)

Significance of the Study

As the student population across the country becomes more diverse (Bryant et al., 2017) and the teacher population remains relatively consistent with little diversity (NCES, 2013), a better understanding of how African American students interact and relate with their teachers becomes even more important. This study contributes to the body of knowledge on student-teacher relationships, and more specifically, to the limited research that exists on African American student perceptions of those relationships in rural areas. These new ideas are likely to inform best educational practices and prompt teachers towards particular courses of action in regard to building and maintaining positive relationships with students. Teachers will be able to apply the insight gained from this study to enhance their practices and build better relationships with all students. Strong student-teacher relationships have been found to improve student academic achievement and school engagement (Roorda et al., 2011), so the results of this study have implications for the achievement and engagement of African American students in rural settings being taught by primarily White teachers.

Assumptions

This study was based on two fundamental assumptions. First, students in the participating high schools will honestly communicate their racial identification in order to include only students who identify as African American in the study. Secondly, students participating in the study will share openly and honestly about their experiences in developing relationships with teachers to allow their unique experiences to inform the study.

Limitations

It was important to consider how particular limitations may influence the conclusions of this study. Participants were selected based on their enrollment as a student at a high school that received an overall school report card grade of A or B as designated by the state department of education and had an African American student population above 13.4%, their identification as African American, and their willingness to participate in the study, so the findings of this study may be limited to this region and student population. This study was conducted with two high schools in the state of Arkansas, neither of which the researcher has personal connections or direct involvement with, so the recruitment of participants, communication of information, and coordination of meetings was dependent on local school administrators, which may impact how students at each school perceive and respond to the study.

Delimitations

In order to better understand the perceptions of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships, participants eligible for the study were restricted to only African American high school students who are currently

enrolled in 10th, 11th, or 12th grade at an Arkansas public high school. Further, only high schools with a school report card grade of A or B, which reflects academic achievement, and an African American student population above 13.4% were eligible to participate in the study.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters, each with a distinct purpose. Chapter One serves as the introduction to the study and provides the background and statement of the problem, purpose of the study, its significance, definition of terms, limitations, and delimitations of the study. Chapter Two provides a literature review of topics pertinent to the study, including academic achievement, student engagement, mentorship, impacts of student-teacher relationships, qualities of positive student-teacher relationships, historical perspectives of African American education, and African American student-teacher relationships. Chapter Three outlines the methodology of the study, with specific information about the research design, population and sample selection, sampling method, data collection, data analysis, and credibility. Chapter Four relays the findings of the study, which highlights the data collected through focus group meetings, interviews, and artifacts. Chapter Five concludes the study by presenting the summary of findings, discussion of key findings, implications for practice, and implications for future research.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Psychological research has highlighted our human need for social interaction (Lieberman, 2013). For students in K-12 settings, one major form of social interaction comes from their relationships with teachers in the school setting. Beyond meeting the need for social interaction, though, "student-teacher relationships…truly matter with regard to students' academic and personal well-being" (Phillippo, 2012, p. 443). Learning occurs through relationships (Rogoff et al., 2014). A substantial body of literature exists to support the importance of student-teacher relationships on students' academic performance, school engagement, psychological health, and human development (McCombs, 2014; Roorda et al., 2011; Wang, Brinkworth, & Eccles, 2013). Some researchers have gone as far as to say that relationships between students and teachers are the most important element of successful schools (Nieto, 2010). In examining the information available on African American students and their relationships with teachers, there appears to be a difference in the perceptions, experiences, and effects of those relationships for African American students in comparison to their White classmates (Roorda et al., 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Based on this research, it is clear that student-teacher relationships are a key element for student, teacher, and school success, and this importance prompts the need to explore the dynamics between students and teachers that may promote positive relationships for all students with all teachers.

The purpose of this study was to consider the perceptions of African American high school students in Arkansas public schools on the development of student-teacher relationships. Relevant literature on student engagement, student-teacher relationships, and African American educational experiences have been included to inform this study.

Specifically, this literature review examines the following topics pertinent to the study: society's central focus on academic achievement, the connection between engagement and achievement, mentorship, impacts of student-teacher relationships, qualities of positive student-teacher relationships, historical perspectives of African American education, and African American students' experience with student-teacher relationships, Self-determination theory serves as the theoretical foundation of this study, so an overview of the theory and its implications on the study are highlighted at the conclusion of the chapter.

Academic Achievement and Engagement

The academic achievement of American students has been a concern since the early 1800s when critics began sounding the alarm that the education system was not adequately educating students (Hofstader, 1963). To be fair, there is no clear evidence from the early 1800s to the 1960s that American academic achievement was less than the achievement of other countries around the world, but the issue persisted nonetheless (Cutright & Fernquist, 2014). In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published the monumental *A Nation at Risk* report that set the tone for education, achievement, and accountability for the following decades. Likening the quality of education at the time to domestic terrorism, the report made it clear that American education was failing and the future of the nation depended upon its improvement (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Despite not being totally accurate and reflective of America's place in global academic achievement since it was designed to confirm already established concerns over education, the report was embraced as a prompt for greater focus on academic achievement and stronger

accountability (Kamenetz, 2016). *A Nation at Risk*, along with several pieces of legislation such as Goals 2000, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top, placed a priority on achievement data and made learning outcomes a competition with other countries and other schools for the sake of the global economy (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Goals 2000, 1994; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2001; Race to the Top Executive Summary, 2009). As the writers of *A Nation at Risk* warned, students who do not master the required skills “will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life” (1983, p.15). Since the national spotlight has been placed on the education system and the primary measure of success is academic achievement, it is imperative that a solid understanding of the factors that lead to proficient achievement is reached. There are numerous factors, both inside and outside of school, that impact student academic achievement to varying degrees, but engagement is a specific factor that has proven to have a significant impact on achievement (Hattie, 2008).

Importance of Engagement

Engagement is one element that warrants special consideration since several studies have found a positive relationship between student engagement and academic achievement (Willms, 2003; Conner & Pope, 2013; Marks, 2000). In an analysis of results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which includes data across multiple countries, Willms (2003) claims that “engagement and academic achievement go hand-in-hand” (p. 9). He goes on to point out that student engagement is commonly a predictor of multiple schooling outcomes, and especially academic

performance. Conner and Pope (2013) conducted a study in 15 high-achieving schools to understand how to reach full engagement in middle and high school because they understood that engagement is “an important driver of school achievement as well as a critical antecedent to understanding material and acquiring new skills” (p.1427), as well as a buffer against risky behaviors or unhealthy outcomes. Another study found that school engagement has a strong influence on “preventing academic failure, promoting competence, and influencing a wide range of adolescent outcomes” (Li & Lerner, 2013, p.20).

Engagement is a complex concept with a multitude of definitions available for consideration, so it can be challenging to arrive at a conclusive definition from which to work; however, it is helpful to clarify a few components of engagement that are essential to understanding how it can impact academic achievement and student success (Li & Lerner, 2013). One simple definition proposed by Li and Lerner (2013) is “the extent to which students are involved in, attached, and committed to the academic and social activities in school” (p.20). This view of engagement focuses on how students feel about the academic and social activities at school and their responses to those feelings. Another way to look at engagement comes from Marks (2000), who views engagement as a psychological process that centers on the focus and effort students expend in the work of learning. Marks’ view of engagement is primarily interested in the psychological dynamics of how students come to decide how engaged they will be in school. Over time the concept of student engagement has grown to become accepted as a “multidimensional construct such that students’ behavioral, emotional, and cognitive experiences in school can be studied simultaneously rather than separately” (Li & Lerner, 2013, p.21). Scholars

have recognized the complexity of engagement and the various elements that influence it, so the scope of engagement has been broadened to include those various elements.

One factor in student engagement that emerges repeatedly in the literature, though, is positive student-teacher relationships (Conner & Pope, 2013; Schussler, 2009). Conner and Pope (2013) point out the strong association between full engagement and positive student-teacher relationships. Roorda et al.'s (2011) study makes a clear connection between improved student-teacher relationships and improved student engagement. In order for students to embrace high expectations and challenging curricula, they need support from the adults around them (Klem & Connell, 2004). Positive student-teacher relationships are essential to student engagement, and student engagement is a key element for academic achievement. In examining student-teacher relationships as a means to understanding student engagement and achievement, the full scope of relationships between students and adults must be considered, specifically within the concept of mentorship.

Mentorship and Relationships

Mentorship has been recognized for its potential to contribute to a range of favorable outcomes, such as behavioral, motivational, and academic outcomes (Eby et al., 2008), so the concept of mentorship and its association with relationships warrants consideration in an effort to better understand the full scope of student-teacher relationships. While significant research exists on mentoring, there is not a singular clear definition that connects the diverse meanings of the concept (Dawson, 2014). Broadly speaking, mentoring might be defined as a positive relationship between a non-parental adult and a young person (Baker & Maguire, 2005). One model of mentoring defines

outcomes based on three key outcomes: improvement of social skills, improvement of thinking skills, and recognition of the adult as a role model (Rhodes, 2002). Mentorship can take on many formats, including school-based, community-based, and work-based (Eby et al., 2008; Jacobs, 2020).

Mentoring with students is based on the premise that positive relationships with adults are essential for personal, social, and intellectual growth (Ainsworth, 1989; Rhodes, 2002). Mentorship has been found to lead to several positive outcomes, and has been given serious attention nationwide as a vital tool for students to overcome social, behavioral, and academic challenges (Eby et al., 2008; Mentoring, 2017). However, despite being the most attempted intervention for behavioral and academic issues (Tolan et al., 2013), mentoring has achieved mixed results in studies since mentoring programs, relationships, and goals are so diverse across the country (Berstein et al., 2009; Eby et al., 2008). Some specific elements of mentoring programs and relationships that have proven to be successful include mentors with experience in helping roles, clear expectations, facilitation of meaningful activities, parent communication and involvement, regular training, incorporation of community, and ongoing evaluation of the mentoring program (DuBois et al., 2002). At the core of successful mentorship, though, is the mentor-mentee relationship, and there is agreement on the importance of that relationship (Keller & Pryce, 2010).

Studies have indicated that between 50% and 80% of students report having a meaningful relationship with an adult besides their parent (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). Mentors can be any non-parental adult, so mentors may include teachers, but mentorship is not exclusive to educators, so

there are likely other adults in the lives of students who are impacting them in various ways (Baker & Maguire, 2005). Student-teacher relationships take place within a larger context of relationships students have with other adults, so the inclusion of a broader definition of mentoring and an examination of it in this study is warranted. With relationship's central role in successful mentorship, it is helpful to consider mentorship and students' perception of it, both inside and outside of school, to contribute to a more complete understanding of how students perceive relationships with teachers (Keller & Pryce, 2010). The relationship aspect of mentorship, learning, and school in general result in several impacts that warrant further attention.

Impacts of Student-Teacher Relationships

Positive student-teacher relationships have been found to result in a range of benefits for students at all levels of schooling, including academic achievement, psychological well-being, and school engagement (Cornelius-White, 2007; Schussler, 2009). On the other hand, negative student-teacher relationships can lead to decreases in those same areas (Dods, 2013; Lessard et al., 2014; McNeeley, 2005). There are several specific aspects of academics, psychology, and engagement that are influenced by student-teacher relationships, and these impacts can be found across all demographics. Student-teacher relationships' impact on achievement, engagement, student support, psychological well-being, and behavior highlight the importance of those relationships.

Achievement, Engagement, and Support

Multiple studies have shown that positive student-teacher relationships can result in improved academic achievement (Cornelius-White, 2007; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). When students perceive that their teachers are supportive, their grade point average,

attendance, and graduation rates are improved in relation to their peers (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009; Kahne et al., 2008). In fact, Hamre and Pianta (2005) found that when students with histories of poor academic performance interacted with a supportive teacher, their achievement improved. When students view their teachers as supportive and caring, they tend to value learning more and engage in class activities, which leads to improved academic achievement (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). In an instance of subject specific performance, Martin and Rimm-Kaufman (2015) identified student-teacher relationships as an influence on students' interest in mathematics.

Perhaps even more significantly than the impact on academic achievement, strong student-teacher relationships result in enhanced student engagement with school (Roorda et al., 2011). There are several elements to student-teacher relationships that promote student engagement, and these include teacher care, teacher warmth, responsiveness, and connection. As teachers get to know students and express their concern for them in genuine ways, students are more likely to engage in the learning environment (Schussler, 2009). When students feel that their teachers like them and care about them, they are more likely to engage with school (Wang & Eccles, 2012). As teachers are perceived as more caring, students will be more interested in school and feel a greater sense of belonging at school (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). The sense of belonging that student-teacher relationships can develop in students has benefits, as well. When students feel that they belong in the classroom, their engagement, motivation, and attachment are improved, which can lead to higher levels of persistence, achievement, and attainment (Rumberger, 2011). Warmth and responsiveness are two specific characteristics that

teachers can demonstrate to strengthen relationships with students and promote further engagement. Some of these same attributes of student-teacher relationships contribute to the psychological well-being of students as well.

Psychological Well-Being

Along with increased academic achievement, evidence for improved psychological well-being as a result of strong student-teacher relationships is available as well. One study determined that teachers have the greatest impact on students' psychological experiences in the classroom (Osterman, 2010). This finding supports Wang and Eccles' (2012) conclusion that teacher support on emotional and cognitive engagement was stronger than peer social support. If these findings are accurate, then in many cases, teachers have a greater potential for supporting students' psychological well-being in the classroom than the students' peers. While many studies on student-teacher relationships collect data from the adult perspective, Conner, Miles, and Pope (2014) gathered qualitative data from high school students who claimed that social emotional support from teachers results in lower internalizing symptoms, less academic worry, and fewer physical problems. Joyce and Early (2014) found that positive relationships with teachers reduced depressive symptoms in students, and multiple sources affirm the conclusion that positive student-teacher relationships decrease depression and increase self-esteem (McGrath, 2009; Wang, Brinkworth, & Eccles, 2013). On the other side of this finding, though, negative student-teacher relationships can be a risk factor for mental health issues with higher depression and lower self-esteem (De Wit et al., 2011; Dods, 2013; Drugli, 2013). It seems to work that teachers serve as a sort of buffer for the academic and psychological challenges that students may face, which helps students

navigate the complexities of adolescence and school (Wentzel, 2016). In their study on student-teacher relationships at the secondary level, Krane et al. (2016) identified safeness, recognition, and closeness as a few of the key words associated with the relationships. As positive student-teacher relationships influence the psychological well-being of students, so they also influence potentially at-risk behaviors of students.

At-Risk Behaviors

At-risk behaviors can encompass a range of behaviors dependent of the definition of at-risk, but an acceptable definition comes from the National Center for Educational Statistics (Kaufman & Bradbury, 1992) as it describes students who are at risk. An at-risk behavior is one that will likely lead to a student failing school (Kaufman & Bradbury, 1992), so this includes lack of attendance, drug use, misconduct, and dropping out, among others. McNeeley (2005) examined components of school connectedness and found that student-teacher relationships are the key predictor of decreased at-risk behavior. In a longitudinal study evaluating social support across multiple dimensions of engagement, Wang and Eccles (2012) concluded that teachers play an especially important role in improving student compliance with school rules, helping students develop a sense of school identification, and leading students to value school more. Several studies have established a connection between student-teacher relationships and school dropout rates, with stronger relationships resulting in decreased dropouts (Barile et al., 2012; Lessard et al., 2014; Bergeron, Chouinard, & Janosz, 2015). In addition to the immediate impact of positive student-teacher relationships, Wang, Brinkworth, and Eccles (2013) recognized the lowered likelihood of student involvement in delinquent or violent behaviors over time as well if those students have positive relationships with

teachers. The benefit of student-teacher relationships on students at school is clear, but the literature goes further to suggest that strong relationships with teachers can moderate the negative effects of neighborhood violence, school closings, and low socioeconomic status for students (Woolley & Bowen, 2007; Gwynne & de la Torre, 2009; Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009). In order for student-teacher relationships to result in the positive impacts highlighted in this review, there are necessary qualities of student-teacher relationships that must exist in order to be successful.

Qualities of Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

Student-teacher relationships can exist anywhere on a continuum ranging from positive to negative, and each relationship delivers its corresponding impact, whether a benefit or consequence based on the strength of the relationship. There are certain qualities of positive student-teacher relationships that researchers have identified as especially valuable, though (Phillippo, 2012; Roorda et al., 2011; Noddings, 2005). Based on components of the self-determination theory that says students' basic needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy must be met in order for them to become motivated, engaged, and high-achieving, particular elements of student-teacher relationships contribute to addressing those needs (Roorda et al., 2011). Central to successful student-teacher relationships are the ways in which teachers demonstrate care and support, students have agency within the relationship, and teachers make specific moves to build relationships.

Teacher Care

A fundamental aspect of successful student-teacher relationships is teacher care, which takes on multiple forms across contexts and relationships. Noddings (2005) writes

extensively on the concept of care in education because it forms the foundation for a relationship, and she distinguishes between the virtue of care, which indicates a more general sense of caring where teachers care about students' learning, and the relation of care, which takes on a more personalized approach where teachers know students and take actions of care towards them. Cooper and Miness (2014) define teacher care as "the teacher's concern for students' wellbeing" (p.267). In a qualitative study focusing on students from non-dominant groups' responses to teacher efforts at showing personalism and developing relationships, Phillippo (2012) uses regard and care interchangeably, and defines the concept as "a willingness to extend oneself beyond required duties, and interest in students as individuals" (p.452). In any definition of teacher care, student perception of the effort at caring must be included before it can truly be considering caring. As Noddings (2005) points out, "without an affirmative response from the cared-for, we cannot call an encounter or relation caring" (p.2-3).

Students have given insight on the teacher care element of student-teacher relationships by communicating their perceptions of what constitutes caring in several studies (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Phillippo, 2012; Krane et al., 2016). A key finding across multiple studies is the importance of small acts that have a significant impact on how students feel about teacher care. Students feel recognized and valued by "the small details of everyday interactions like asking the students if they are ok" (Krane et al., 2016, p.31641). Similarly, it stood out to students when teachers noticed absences, told students they were missed, knew students' names, and said hello in the hallway (Cothran, Kulinna, & Garragy, 2003; Ozer, Wold, & Kong, 2008). Students feel that teachers show care by respecting and encouraging students, helping students with academics, interacting

with students frequently, treating each student fairly, assisting with personal problems, and positively approaching discipline and classroom management (Davidson, 1999; Osterman, 2010). Two specific ways teachers showed care for students in Davidson's (1999) study that collected student input on teachers was by talking with students about their lives and visiting with students regularly about their academic progress. It is clear that part of teacher care is getting to know students, both personally and academically, through regular interaction with them. In a simpler finding, students felt their teachers cared about them by showing kindness towards them (Dexter, Lavigne, & de la Garza, 2016). Teacher care lays the foundation for positive student-teacher relationships, and teacher support serves as the next step in developing that relationship (Noddings, 2005).

Teacher Support

In light of the multitude of benefits when students feel supported, including increased grades, attendance, and graduation rates, the ways in which teachers support students is important to consider (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009; Kahne et al., 2008). It is helpful to consider the range of support that teachers provide that enhance student academic performance. Wentzel (2004) breaks the concept of teacher support into three primary categories: informational, instrumental, and emotional. Informational support involves how students feel they receive appropriate guidance and instruction. Instrumental support highlights how students receive necessary help and feedback. Emotional support focuses on the nurturing and emotionally supportive element of the student-teacher relationship. When teachers exhibit these types of support with students, the various impacts it has on students work together to improve academic achievement.

Dods (2013) studied school-based relationships for students who have experienced trauma, and her findings led her to formulate a coherent four element model for the supportive relationships that students felt they needed. The first element is that teachers need to lead the interaction with students. Secondly, relationships need to be based on authentic caring. The third element focuses on the active interaction between students and teacher, and it emphasizes that teachers should be in tune with their students to know how best to be supportive. Finally, each relationship should be individualized and students should be treated as a person. When these four elements coexist in a student-teacher relationship, students are more likely to feel supported. While teachers have a vital role in leading the relationship and demonstrating support, it is also essential that students are given agency to fully participate in the relationship (Dods, 2013; Noddings, 2005).

Student Agency

Just as caring cannot exist without a reciprocal response of some sort from the receiver of care, neither can positive relationships exist without both individuals contributing to the relationship (Noddings, 2005). Strong student-teacher relationships require that students have agency in working with the teacher to co-create the relationship. When students and teachers are working together to create a positive relationship, it is usually clear to both individuals, and they can each give similar feedback on the quality of the relationship (Prewett, Bergin, & Huang, 2019). Students demonstrate across studies that they desire authentic relationships where they have an active role to play rather than a passive, receiving role (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Phillippo, 2012). One student in Cooper and Miness's (2014) study talked about a

particular positive relationship with a teacher by saying, "she seems more like, not a friend, but more of a person than a teacher" (p.278). This student found value in the relationship because she felt it was a person-to-person relationship rather than an authority-to-subordinate relationship.

Strong relationships are built on mutual knowledge where teachers know students well and students know teachers on some level (Phillippo, 2012). Mutual knowledge is an important quality of student-teacher relationships because it gives students some agency and autonomy in the relationship instead of feeling forced simply because of the teacher's role (Phillippo, 2012). Students want to feel that they are genuinely engaging in a meaningful relationship with another person instead of being pushed into a relationship because a school program or teacher responsibility requires it. Another element of student agency that goes along with mutual knowledge is the student's right to privacy and ability to share information as they feel comfortable (Phillippo, 2012). Respecting students' privacy and allowing them to share information at their own pace is a key feature of an authentic relationship. In addition to these specific ways teachers can show care and support while allowing students to have agency, there are certain actions or approaches teachers can take to further solidify their relationships with students.

Teacher Actions

As students and teachers are co-creators of student-teacher relationships, there are certain behaviors and approaches by teachers that are more conducive to positive relationships. Dods (2013) includes in her model of supportive relationships that teachers should lead the interaction since students may not know how to effectively initiate the relationship or sustain it over time. When teachers made the effort to demonstrate

prosocial behaviors by sharing materials, providing encouragement, and keeping a positive classroom atmosphere, among other actions, students perceived a stronger student-teacher relationship (Prewett, Bergin, & Huang, 2019). Teachers should initiate personal and academic interactions with students one-on-one as well as collectively (Cooper & Miness, 2014). Direct interactions with students are important, but research has shown that the interactions teachers have with other students are also valuable for the development of relationships with all students since students observe how teachers engage with other students in order to determine their own comfort level with the teacher (Phillippo, 2012). An important and encouraging note for teachers in building strong relationships with students is that students do not need or want teachers with expert skills in mental health or any other field; rather, they simply want a teacher who provides a safe learning environment and is willing to connect with them (Dods, 2013). These qualities of positive student-teacher relationships are applicable to all students as determined by a range of research, but there are particular aspects of education, student achievement and engagement, and student-teacher relationships that must be considered from the perspective of African American students and teachers in order to fully address this study's research question, so a historical understanding of African American education is necessary to fully understand the current reality of American education and student-teacher relationships.

Historical Perspectives of African American Education

The development of relationships between teachers and African American students takes place in a context shaped by the history of African Americans in the United States beginning in the early 17th century, so the historical perspectives of African

American education is essential to understanding the current reality of students, teachers, and their relationships. Most African Americans in the United States today are descendants of slaves, and the institution of slavery in America, dating back to 1619, traditionally included restrictions on education (Schneider & Schneider, 2007; Wood, 2005, Bennett, 1993). Some religious education for slaves was allowed over the years, but that was typically the exception instead of the norm as specific religious groups had to find ways to educate slaves without any existing formal education system (Woodson, 1915, Jones-Wilson et al., 1996, Wood, 2005). This background of little to no education for non-whites in the early years of America impacted the experiences of African American students going forward, and a brief overview of how education evolved for African American students over the following years is helpful in recognizing features of modern American education.

African American Student Perspective

Education for enslaved people was never formalized, but the New York African Free School was established in 1787 as the first school for freed Blacks (Rury, 1983). Black people in the northern United States were afforded some opportunities in terms of education; however, the southern United States held firm in their resistance to any type of education for slaves (Woodson, 1915). Nearly all slaves in the United States lived in the southern part of the country in the 1800s, so the harsh restrictions on education were the experience of all but less than 1% of Blacks at the time (U.S. Census, n.d.). A major victory for African Americans came with the Civil War as slavery was outlawed and all slaves were set free, but the quick implementation of the Jim Crow laws in the South served to further oppress and prevent any chance of social mobility for Blacks (Kennedy,

1959, 1990; Myrdal, 1944). One major component of Jim Crow laws was the separate but equal policy that allowed the segregation of White and Black students despite the inferior quality of the facilities and resources of Black schools (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896). The Supreme Court ruling on Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), which allowed Louisiana to provide separate accommodations for Black passengers on trains, served as the foundation for Southern states to enact Jim Crow laws that kept most facilities and services segregated.

Jim Crow laws and Plessy v. Ferguson's separate but equal doctrine ruled the day for education until the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case determined in 1954 that segregating Black students was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court recognized the disparity between the treatment and funding of the separate Black schools and White schools, and decided that "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place" (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954, p.495), thereby requiring the integration of public schools in the United States. The integration of schools did not happen immediately, though, and resistance from Southern states required the President's involvement to use the force of the National Guard and further legislation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to actually make integration a reality (Rury & Hill, 2012).

The combined efforts of Brown v. Board of Education, Civil Rights Act of 1964, and numerous forced integrations led to over a third of Black students in the South attending predominantly White schools by 1972 (Lasker-Scott, 2015). While the goal of educating Black and White students together may have been successful, some scholars have pointed out unintended consequences of integration that impact African American students, especially as it relates to student-teacher relationships. Despite the obvious inferiority of facilities, resources, and support for Black schools prior to integration,

Martin and Brooks (2020) point out that students were "largely educated in schools with teachers who understood their culture, believed in, cared about, and fought for their success, and served as role models and mentors" (p.1). Black students "lost role models who not only knew them on a personal level, but had a unique understanding of their communities, cultural identities, and individual situations" (Lutz, 2017, p.1). Black teachers were typically not hired to teach in White schools, so Black students were being educated by White teachers who had little understanding about how to teach students of color (Kluger, 2004). Contemporary research has found that Black students evaluated by White teachers receive lower ratings, so this result of Brown v. Board of Education is not irrelevant to the current dynamics between African American students and their teachers (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013).

The current state of African American education is "influenced by the legacy of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow" (Lasker-Scott, 2015, p.16). The history of African American education in the United States has resulted in African Americans being undereducated and underprepared for a society and economy that values educational and financial attainment over nearly anything else (Myrdal, 1944). Graduation rates of African Americans have improved significantly over the years, but they are still lower than the graduation rates of White students (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). The Coleman Report (1966) highlighted that minority students scored lower on academic achievement tests than White students at every level, and findings in the 21st century confirm the continued disparity between Black students and their White peers today (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Just as African American students experienced the American education system differently than White students since colonial times, so did African American

teachers, which is important to consider for its impact on today's teaching workforce and how that workforce influences African American students.

African American Teacher Perspective

African American educators were not formally recognized until schools for freed Blacks began developing in 1787, but even as time went on and teaching became a profession available to African Americans, they were relegated to a second class status with limited access to resources (Rury, 1983; Martin & Brooks, 2020). For instance, White teachers were paid 80% more than Black teachers in 1940 and Black school buildings were worth a fraction of the value of White facilities (Beezer, 1986; Library of Virginia, 2003). However, teaching was one of the few professions open to African Americans, so there was an abundance of talented, qualified Black educators (Lutz, 2017).

One result of the integration of public schools through Brown v. Board of Education was the dismissal and further oppression of African American teachers (Kluger, 2004). In fact, Lutz (2017) reported that more than 38,000 Black teachers in Southern states were dismissed from their positions between 1954 and 1965. Despite having lesser resources in inferior facilities for lower pay in segregated schools, Black teachers were successful in educating their students, so the aftermath of Brown v. Board of Education was harmful in the way Black students were removed from the role models and mentors who understood their culture and believed in them (Martin & Brooks, 2020). As of 2019, over 80% of the teaching workforce is White (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Even though the school age population is currently the most diverse segment of the population, the teachers who work with those students do not reflect that diversity

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Oakley, Stowell, and Logan (2009) proposes that "the legacy of mandated desegregation may have created broader institutional conditions in which Black and other minority teachers remain underrepresented in the teaching force" (p.1576).

Less than 7% of the nation's teachers identify as Black, which means that nearly all students will be taught by White teachers (NCES, 2013). Interestingly, even if all nonwhite teachers are considered, including Black and Hispanic, only about 5% of white 10th graders would have a nonwhite English or math teacher (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). A critical shortage of Black male teachers exists as Black men make up only 2% of the teacher workforce, even though Black students make up around 17% of students in public schools (Kena et al., 2015). It is likely that most students will never encounter a Black male teacher (Bianco, Leech, & Mitchell, 2011). Research has shown the favorable perception and positive impact of Black and Hispanic teachers on all students, regardless of student ethnicity (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). African American students and teachers have experienced a different education system than White students, so it follows that the specific experience of student-teacher relationships is different as well (Voight et al., 2015).

Perspectives on African American Education in Arkansas

The context of this study in Arkansas presents unique dynamics regarding African American education specific to this area that must be understood in order to adequately approach the current environment of race, education, and student-teacher relationships in the state. As a southern state, Arkansas' legacy of African American education is framed by a history of resistance to education for African Americans (Woodson, 1915),

implementation of Jim Crow laws (Kennedy, 1959, 1990; Myrdal, 1944), strict adherence to separate but equal policies (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896), and violent rejection of the mandates of Brown v. Board of Education (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). Arkansas gained specific renown for the state's refusal to allow nine African Americans to begin the integration of Little Rock Central High School in 1957. The governor went so far as to call in the National Guard to resist the desegregation of the Arkansas high school, and the state legislature passed a constitutional amendment to resist the guidance of Brown v. Board of Education (Strauss, 2008).

Since the monumental Little Rock Nine event in 1957, Arkansas education for African American students and teachers has been shaped by a myriad of events that continue today and include contemporary desegregation cases still needing resolution. While the Little Rock Nine conflict became the focal point of desegregation in Arkansas, it is worth noting that a few school districts in the state, such as Charleston and Fayetteville, had already started integrating their schools without much statewide or national fanfare before 1957; however, it became increasingly more controversial for districts to integrate as large scale attention began to be paid to integration efforts after the events of Little Rock Nine (Kirk, 2011). In fact, some school districts that had desegregated relatively peaceably prior to Little Rock Nine were pressured to resegregate, and it was only after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which included more extensive support for integration and consequences for segregation, that districts across the state seriously considered desegregation (Kirk, 2011). In 1966, African American teachers in Morrilton who had lost their jobs when schools were integrated in the district sued for damages and were successful, which provided some recognition for the

discrimination against African American teachers in the years after Brown v. Board of Education (Kirk, 2011).

Despite the legal guidance on desegregation from Brown v. Board of Education and the multiple iterations of the Civil Rights Acts in the 1950s and 1960s, many schools in Arkansas maintained some semblance of segregation in the following decades leading to current times, albeit through creative measures such as charter schools or housing regulations as opposed to outright defiance of laws (Semuels, 2016). Lawsuits on discriminatory educational practices filed against various school districts or state agencies are plentiful in the Arkansas legal landscape since the 1960s, which reflects the tumultuous perceptions of race, education, and equality across the state. For instance, the Jacksonville School District was relieved from judicial desegregation oversight in May of 2021 after a decades long process, where the district was tasked with creating "systems and processes to ensure equitable treatment of all staff and students and to monitor disciplinary procedures that were instituted to keep African American students from being overrepresented in areas of discipline" as explained by former Jacksonville Assistant Superintendent Tiffany Bone in a newspaper article announcing the official desegregation of the districts on May 8, 2021 (Hofheimer, 2021). African American students and teachers in Arkansas today are learning and interacting in an educational environment that was still segregated in the 1960s and continues to reflect a level of disparity between races even now (Kirk, 2011; Semuels, 2016). The state of Arkansas provides a certain environment in which school takes place and students develop relationships with teachers, and there is limited research on this specific topic in Arkansas, but consideration of African American students and student-teacher

relationships on a larger scale can shed some light on the dynamics of relationships building for this area.

African American Students and Student-Teacher Relationships

The benefits of positive student-teacher relationships and consequences of negative relationships can be found across demographics; however, studies have reflected that students may experience those relationships differently based on their identity (Voight et al., 2015; Dexter, Lavigne, & de la Garza, 2016). People within the same setting have a unique perspective on what happens in that setting and how it fits with their identity (Voight et al., 2015). African American students appear to experience student-teacher relationships differently than their White and other minority peers. Using national longitudinal data, Fan, Williams, and Corkin (2011) found that Black students reported less positive student-teacher relationships than their White classmates. Other studies indicated that African American students' levels of engagement were impacted more strongly by positive student-teacher relationships than European American students' levels of engagement (Downey & Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002; Ferguson & Mehta, 2004). In a 2011 study, Roorda et al. looked at several dimensions of student-teacher relationships and concluded that student ethnicity had a significant effect on the association between positive relationships and achievement, although this finding included multiple ethnic and racial categories of students. African American students have unique experiences of the school setting distinct from the experiences of non-African American students, and these perceptions contribute to the formation, development, and sustainability of relationships with adults in the school.

African American Student Perceptions

It is important to consider how the total experiences of African American students helps create their perceptions of student-teacher relationships. African American youth report that they are the victims of racial discrimination from an early age, which results in several consequences for students (Seaton & Douglas, 2014). When students perceive discrimination, they tend to have lower life satisfaction levels, decreased self-esteem, increased depression, increased anxiety, increased anger, and increased problem behaviors (Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009; Prelow et al., 2008; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Black participants in Goings and Bianco's 2016 study shared their experiences with racial discrimination and how both students and teachers racially stereotyped them. A recurring theme in participants' responses was microaggressions that reflected classmates' and teachers' low expectations for the Black students (Goings & Bianco, 2016). Sue et al. (2007) defines racial microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily, verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights or insults to the target person or group (p.273). Participants in Goings and Bianco's study shared that their encounters with racial microaggressions shaped their view on teachers and teaching as a profession (2016).

As Black students report lower levels of safety, connectedness, and student-teacher relationships, the possible reasons for such consistent data must be examined (Voight et al., 2015). In reviewing literature on African American distrust of others and educators specifically, Payne (2008) made the case that students lose trust in schools via limited access to educational resources and disproportionate experiences of negative

treatment. Students were hesitant to trust the school and those individuals in the school environment because they had previously been given little access to the multitude of resources that constitute the educational process and received poor treatment in their school experiences. It is important to note that African American students oftentimes had successful relationships with their African American teachers because those teachers were able to serve as a cultural broker for students as they attempted to navigate an inequitable system (Roberts, 2010). The research is consistent that Black students have especially favorable perceptions of Black teachers (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). The meaningful relationships African American students develop with their African American teachers highlights the universal need for personal relationship yet uncovers a potential issue with student and teacher race.

Teacher Perceptions of African American Students

Considering that teachers have tremendous influence on student outcomes as well as students' beliefs about their abilities and considering that 82% of the teaching workforce is White, the perceptions of teachers on African American students is relevant to understanding how student-teacher relationships are developed (Burgess & Greaves, 2013; Dee, 2015; NCES, 2013). Some research has suggested that a mismatch between student and teacher race, ethnicity, or cultural background results in negative teacher perceptions towards Black students (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). To be clear, Black students evaluated by White teachers tend to receive more negative ratings than White students evaluated by White teachers, despite controlling for students' test scores, socioeconomic status, and other school characteristics (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). Along that line of thinking, Gershenson, Holt, and Papageorge (2016) found that "non-

black teachers are 12 percentage points more likely to expect black students to complete a high school diploma or less than are black teachers" (p.24).

Teachers have expressed their thoughts, feelings, and limitations on effectively building relationships with African American students. On a larger scale, White teachers indicated in two separate studies that Black families are more dysfunctional than White families, which certainly has implications for how teachers interact with students at school (Heinze, 2008; Laughter, 2011). To go with the perception that Black families are dysfunctional, White teachers in Markowitz and Puchner's (2014) study shared their belief that diversity was positive for schools because Black students could be exposed to positive role models they did not have at home and White students could develop empathy for less fortunate people and appreciation for what they have. These studies highlight the deficit thinking of many White teachers who view African American students' differences as "impediments to learning" (Grantham & Ford, 2003). This deficit thinking is given significance by the color-blind ideology that assumes the current curriculum, instructional practices, and school setting are race-neutral, which points blame at any struggle by African American students back to the differences of the African American culture instead of any possible issues with the learning environment (Granthan & Ford, 2003). In order to adequately understand the experiences and perceptions of African American students and be able to integrate the findings of this study into any meaningful conclusions, a theoretical framework must be utilized to serve as a foundation for the study and the interpretation of data.

Theoretical Framework

There are countless factors that influence student achievement, engagement, and relationships, so a single theory that provides a complete framework for understanding student-teacher relationships is not possible; however, self-determination theory is one way of examining the psychology of motivation, engagement, and relationships through six mini-theories that connect to present a more holistic picture of how students perceive learning, school, and the world around them (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Self-determination theory is not specific to any particular race, age, or gender, rather, it is universal to all individuals as each person navigates the world in an effort to meet three basic needs of all humans: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci et al., 1991). Competence, autonomy, and relatedness are essential to students becoming intrinsically motivated and embracing a healthy process of internalization, which focuses on an individual's ability to "assimilate, coordinate, and regulate inputs from both external and internal environments" (Ryan & Deci, 2019, p.8). To be clear, competence involves an individual's knowledge and ability to achieve desired outcomes, autonomy highlights an individual's ability to self-initiate and self-regulate one's thoughts and actions, and relatedness refers to an individual's ability to develop positive connections with other people (Deci et al., 1991).

The three basic needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are central to self-determination theory, but the theory itself is made up of six mini-theories that comprise a dynamic, flexible structure that has evolved over the years to accommodate the most updated knowledge of motivation, personality, and wellness (Ryan, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2018). The theories of cognitive evaluation, organismic integration,

causality orientations, basic psychological needs, goal contents, and relationship motivation "systematically overlap in a manner that is reflective of how they have organically emerged, with each new mini-theory representing an extension of an existing body of knowledge that was already established within self-determination theory" (Ryan & Deci, 2019, p.10). Such a range of theories is necessary to address the multitude of influences on motivation, persistence, and engagement, which consequently, leads people to "differentially invest in the activities or goals they are actively pursuing" (Ryan & Deci, 2019, p.9). As it relates to this study, the ways in which students perceive the dynamics of relationship development with teachers and its connection to their needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness will influence their motivation, engagement, and achievement. Self-determination theory accounts for a range of factors that may influence the development of relationships between students and teachers, and more specifically, the success of those relationships in terms of improving motivation, engagement, and achievement.

Summary

As this study intended to examine the perceptions of African American students on the development of student-teacher relationships, so this literature review was designed to address the topics relevant to the larger concepts of student-teacher relationships and African American student experiences. This chapter began with an overview of the national focus on academic achievement and moved to highlight how student engagement contributes to academic achievement (Kamenetz, 2016; Willms, 2003). Positive student-teacher relationships lead to greater student engagement, so a review of the impacts of student-teacher relationships and the qualities of positive

student-teacher relationships was included. To clarify the roles in student-teacher relationships, a section on mentorship preceded the analysis of student-teacher relationships. This study focused on African American students, so a portion of this chapter was dedicated to understanding the historical perspectives of African American students and teachers. The review became more specific in the following section as the details of relationships between African American students and all teachers were considered. This chapter concluded with an overview of self-determination theory, which serves as the theoretical framework for this study.

Chapter III. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships. This chapter outlines the research design, participant selection, sampling method, data collection, and data analysis that was conducted in fulfillment of that purpose.

Research Question

The study was guided by the following research question:

1. What are the perceptions of African American high school students regarding the development of student-teacher relationships?

Research Design

In an effort to understand and explore the perceptions of African American high school students' perceptions of student-teacher relationship development, this study was conducted qualitatively. Human relationships are complex, and qualitative methods promote the study concepts "in depth and detail" (Patton, 2015, p.22), so a qualitative study was appropriate for examining the intricacies of interactions between students and teachers. While a quantitative study would solicit feedback from a larger population, the data would be limited in its depth and detail compared to the results produced from a qualitative study. This study sought to explore the reasoning and meaning behind the phenomenon of student-teacher relationships, rather than examining the quantity, frequency, or correlation between any factors as could be studied with a quantitative research project. A benefit of qualitative research is that it "allows the researcher to uncover or make meaning of a phenomenon and illustrate the different realities that exist

for the participants through using and reporting about their experiences and perceptions" (Lasker-Scott, 2015, p.52).

Merriam's (1998) five characteristics of qualitative research are helpful in framing this study and justifying specific design choices. First, qualitative research must be used to consider the meaning people have created. This study fits these criteria as its purpose was to understand the meanings students have created through their perceptions of student-teacher relationships. The second characteristic focuses on the researcher's role as the instrument for data collection and analysis. In this study, the researcher facilitated all data collection and analysis. Fieldwork is the third characteristic of qualitative research. For this study, fieldwork took place as the researcher conducted focus group meetings, albeit virtually due to Covid-19 restrictions. The fourth characteristic is the utilization of inductive research strategies to guide the study. In this study, the data collected from students and the data analysis that followed led to the development of original themes and conclusions, instead of attempting to coordinate data with pre-determined theories. Finally, the fifth characteristic of qualitative research involves the rich, descriptive findings that will result from the study. This study incorporated the extensive data collected from participants into its findings to highlight the specific and complex elements involved with the development of student-teacher relationships, especially accounting for the influence of race and culture on those relationships.

To go along with the purpose of considering the perspectives of multiple participants, a constructivist paradigm was applied to this study. Constructivism holds that more than one reality can exist based on the social and experiential mental

constructions developed by individuals, which gives legitimacy to the realities of this study's participants as they shared about their experience and understanding of developing relationships with teachers (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Qualitative research methods fit well with a constructivist paradigm as qualitative research seeks to create meaning of a phenomenon and understand the different realities participants hold based on their experiences and perceptions (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015).

This qualitative study focused on the experiences and interpretations of those experiences as described during a focus group meeting, so a phenomenological approach is most appropriate. A phenomenological study is "one that focused on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what it is they experience" (Patton, 1990, p.71), which lends itself to the purpose of this study in exploring how African American students perceive the development of student-teacher relationships. Utilizing Creswell's (1998) proposed procedures for phenomenological inquiry, the researcher reviewed the foundational concepts of phenomenology, developed research questions aligned with this method, collected data from individuals through focus groups, analyzed the data and organized them into clusters, and withdrew themes from the analysis.

Narrative inquiry is another central element to the design of this study. Narrative inquiry involves a collaboration between the researcher and participant to understand and make meaning of the experiences shared by the participant in the study (Butler-Kisber, 2010). In its simplest sense as it relates to qualitative research, a narrative is a story, whether short or extensive, about something significant told by the person who has lived it (Chase, 2005). This study intended to use narratives of participants' experiences as

African-American students perceiving the development of student-teacher relationships to make sense of and identify themes across the broader context of student-teacher relationships and race in Arkansas. One of the goals of this study was to validate the input of students as valuable co-creators of academic research instead of focusing solely on teacher responses to inform the study, which aligns with one primary benefit of narrative inquiry: oral history. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) highlight how oral history serves as one dynamic of narrative inquiry when participants go beyond a simple report of an experience and become an informant into a particular community. From a greater perspective, "narratives have the ability of giving voice to a community, region, nation, and culture" (Lasker-Scott, 2015, p.56). Participants of this study gave voice to their community membership as African Americans and high school students in Arkansas.

Population and Sample Selection

This study was conducted with participants who identify as African American and are high school students in school districts that meet established demographic and achievement criteria. To ensure consistency in the study since districts may organize their campuses differently, high school was considered grades 10, 11, and 12, so students were actively enrolled in one of those three grades at the time of participation in the study. Student qualification as African American was based on students' self-report of their racial identification.

High schools selected for this study met two primary criteria: 1) had an African American student population matching or exceeding the population percentage of African Americans in the United States and 2) had a school report card grade of A or B. According to the Arkansas Department of Education Data Center, there are 306 high

schools in the state of Arkansas (2020), which is too large of a sample to effectively conduct qualitative research (Gentles et al., 2015). Since this study centers on the perceptions and experiences of African American high school students, school demographics were used as criteria to reduce the potential sample size to a more manageable number.

The United States Census reports that 13.4% of Americans identify as Black or African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), so Arkansas high schools with student populations matching or exceeding the national African American percentage of 13.4% as reported by the Arkansas Department of Education Data Center were eligible for this study. Limiting participation to Arkansas high schools with an African American student population at or above 13.4% of the total student population ensures that the study reflects the demographic landscape of America as a whole, as well as provides a large enough sample size at each high school to maintain confidentiality and anonymity (Saunders et al., 2015).

The second criteria narrowed the list of eligible schools to 11 high schools that have an African American population at or above the national percentage and earned an A or B on the Arkansas School Report Card. The Arkansas School Report Card is a legal requirement intended to be an annual school performance report for each public school in the state, and it includes a range of data such as assessment scores, growth scores, teacher qualifications, and indicators on school environment (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020). While the school report card does not reflect the entire learning environment or its success, it does provide a measure to identify high performing schools. One goal of this study was to determine characteristics of positive student-

teacher relationships, and schools that are achieving at a high level academically may be able to contribute more to the conversation on positive student-teacher relationships than a lower academically performing school.

Setting

Eleven high schools in the state met the criteria for participation in this study, ranging in location across the central and southern regions of the state with the exception of one school located in the northeast corner of the state. Each of the 11 schools earned a B rating on the school report card. Student enrollments among the schools range from 141 students at the smallest school to 2,714 students at the largest school. Only two high schools had a student population over 2,000, while the third largest school had 892 students, and all other schools had 589 students or fewer. African American student population percentages in the schools range from 18.0% to 38.1%. After criteria for eligibility in the study was established and information was distributed to each of the 11 high schools, two high schools expressed willingness to participate in the study. Three other high schools expressed interest in the study, but concerns over Covid-19 prevented them from committing to participate.

Sampling Method

Participants for this study were selected through a multi-layered approach, which included an initial level of purposeful sampling followed by an additional level of random sampling from the initial purposeful sample. Since this qualitative phenomenological study required specific characteristics of participants so that they can contribute to the topic of the study, a completely random sampling strategy was not effective; rather, as Cohen et al. (2000) views it, sampling methods for phenomenological

studies should be a matter of selecting informants who can share insight into a particular experience or community. Since the purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships, it was necessary to limit the population to individuals who are high school students and identify as African American, so selection criteria restricted the participant population to African American high school students. Criteria was established to limit eligible participants to those high school students who attend one of the eleven high schools that have an African American student population at or above the national population percentage of 13.4% and earned an A or B on the Arkansas School Report Card.

In order to conduct the study with a manageable sample size, a level of random sampling took place after potential participants had been identified through the filter of both criteria: African American student population and school report card grade. Random sampling allowed the researcher to randomly select participants from within a group that met particular criteria, and this sampling method is appropriate when there are more participants that meet the criteria than can be effectively included in the study (Patton, 2015). The total population of African American high school students who attend the participating high schools in this study exceeded the timeframe and resources available for this study, so random sampling ensured a representative sample size and reduced bias (Patton, 2015).

The recruitment for participants began with an initial email to the high school principals at each of the schools introducing the study and requesting permission to distribute information about the study within the school. In order to allow principals to

share the study's materials in their schools without adding an unnecessary responsibility to each principal, the email included suggestions for distributing the information but encouraged each principal to approach the task in the manner that best fit his or her school. Students from the participating high schools received information about the study including a letter outlining the purpose of the study, a consent form for parents to sign, an assent form for students to sign, and contact information for potential participants or their parents to direct any questions or concerns to the researcher. After students returned the consent form to indicate their interest and willingness to participate in the study, the process of randomly selecting participants from the convenience sample of eligible students who are interested in participating in the study was conducted. The researcher followed up with the participants selected for the study to schedule a focus group meeting.

Data Collection

The participants were informed of the research topic and purpose in advance so they could provide written assent of their willingness to participate along with written consent from their parents. Data for this study came from focus group meetings with participants from each high school.

Focus Groups

Focus groups provide an opportunity to collect qualitative data from a small number of participants through a group discussion centered on a particular topic (Wilkinson, 2004). A primary benefit of focus groups is that they can be conducive to participants talking about their thoughts and opinions in a safe and unintimidating environment (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Since this study included race as a central topic, a

focus group to begin the conversation with participants was helpful in encouraging participants to respond honestly to questions without potentially being influenced by the researcher in a one-on-one interview (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The researcher met with 3 to 7 participants in each focus group meeting to ensure the group size allowed for diversity of information yet also gave everyone the opportunity to engage in the discussion (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Focus group meetings lasted approximately one hour and included researcher-developed questions utilizing a standardized open-ended format (Patton, 2015). Each focus group meeting was conducted virtually due to safety guidelines for Covid-19. Focus group meetings were recorded through the virtual conferencing platform along with a secondary digital recorder to prevent data loss from any technical issues, and each recording was transcribed using an online transcription service. The transcription for each recording was reviewed by the researcher in comparison to the recording to ensure accuracy of the transcription.

Focus Group Questions. The following questions will be used to guide the focus group meeting:

1. How would you describe the community you live in?
2. How long have each of you lived in this community?
3. Tell me about a relationship you have with someone outside of the classroom and your family who you consider to be a mentor. Why do you consider them a mentor?
4. Whether you have a mentor or not, what qualities would you say make a good mentor?

5. What are some words that come to your mind when you hear the word "school?"
6. What are some words that come to your mind when you hear "*Participant High School?"*
7. What is your best memory of elementary school?
8. What is your best memory of middle school, junior high, or high school?
9. Can you think of a negative memory of school?
10. What are some experiences you remember from school that involved a teacher? Why do those experiences stand out?
11. Think of a teacher you like and tell me what you like about him or her.
12. How would you describe a good student-teacher relationship?
13. What are some things your teachers have done to build good relationships with students?
14. Can you tell me about a positive experience with a teacher who was a different race than you?
15. Can you tell me about a positive experience with a teacher who was the same race as you?
16. Have you had any negative experiences with teachers that you could describe?
17. Do you think that race has affected your relationships with your teachers?
18. What have I not asked that you would like to discuss?
19. Is there anything that you would like to ask me?

Data Analysis

Each focus group meeting was recorded, transcribed, and verified before being copied into a Word document for analysis. This analysis was conducted utilizing the

constant comparative method to allow for ongoing categorization and comparison (Glaser, 1965). Two key elements of data analysis are coding data and analyzing data to develop theoretical ideas, and the constant comparative method combines both in an ongoing cycle that produces a more integrated and refined analysis that remains consistent with the data (Glaser, 1965). The constant comparative method is an iterative process of constantly comparing and recoding the data to reduce the data to essential themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis conducted using the constant comparative method was appropriate for this study because multiple focus group meetings will contribute to the study's body of data, so a process that emphasizes constant reconsideration of coding and themes ensured that no participants' responses or information will be left out of the final conclusions of the study. As more data was analyzed, a clearer understanding of student perceptions of student-teacher relationships was made possible since all data will be considered before final themes are determined.

The constant comparative method consists of three main stages: chunking data into small units with an attached code, grouping codes into categories, and developing themes based on the content of the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Focus group transcripts were reviewed closely, and codes were developed based on the information and patterns found in each of the data sources. Based on the codes, data was printed, cut out, and pasted on index cards for further analysis. Index cards with codes on them were sorted into themes, and the information discovered during this process led to the themes of the study. Themes found during analysis were copied and pasted into a spreadsheet along with supporting evidence to present the findings of the study in a clear format. A phenomenological qualitative study focuses on the lived experiences of participants,

which includes a diversity of thoughts and actions, so the data collected during the study varied considerably (Patton, 2015). Since the constant comparative method is an ongoing process, it allowed for flexibility in data analysis to ensure that all participant responses were included and valued across the wide spectrum of collected data (Glaser, 1965).

As self-determination theory provides a framework through which to examine the universal concepts of engagement, achievement, and relationship, critical race theory serves as a lens to better understand the experiences and perceptions of African-American students related to those concepts. Critical race theory, with its beginnings in the legal system, at its core, "challenges the universality of white experience/judgment as the authoritative standard that binds people of color and normatively measures, directs, controls, and regulates the terms of proper thought, expression, presentation, and behavior" (Tate, 1997, p.196-197). Critical race theory is a "broad theoretical framework" that serves as "an analytical tool" to examine the circumstances of race in society that have resulted in the current reality of "subjugation, debasement, and disenfranchisement" of many non-white individuals (Sandles, 2020, p.71). It distinguishes itself from other critical theories in its recognition of race as a legitimate frame of reference for analysis, which is important because even though class, gender, and race do intersect in many instances, the disparity between white students and students of color cannot be explained without considering race more closely, so race must be theorized and examined as a stand-alone variable (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Critical race theory is guided by five central tenets, which are expressed in multiple ways by different scholars, but the concepts remain the same as explained by Delgado and Stefancic (2001) in their introductory text on critical race theory. First,

critical race theory recognizes the centrality of race and racism to society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In other words, it is the ordinary way of society. Secondly, interest convergence pushes the agenda of racism because it benefits a large section of society, namely whites and working class people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The next component of critical race theory is that race is a social construct, and there is no biological or genetic foundation for race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Another tenet of critical race theory is an understanding of intersectionality, which means that everyone is a combination of multiple identities instead of a singular one (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Finally, critical race theory proposes that non-white individuals and groups of people have a unique voice that is the only one that can speak to their experiences, thoughts, and behaviors (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Each of these tenets of critical race theory combine to inform this study, but the last tenet focusing on the unique voice of non-white individuals and groups of people is central to the analysis of data in this study. Within this tenet of critical race theory, African American high school students are the only individuals who can speak to their unique experiences in developing relationships with teachers.

Credibility

Credibility reflects the extent to which a study measures or tests what is actually being tested and the results are congruent with reality (Shenton, 2004). Researchers take a number of steps to improve credibility in qualitative studies, and Patton (1999) narrows the issue of credibility in qualitative studies to three distinct elements: “rigorous techniques and methods for gathering high quality data that are carefully analyzed,” “the credibility of the researcher,” and “philosophical belief in the value of qualitative

inquiry" (p.1190). Multiple strategies to ensure credibility are recommended to "enhance the researcher's ability to assess the accuracy of findings as well as convince readers of that accuracy" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.200). In addition to a sound research design, this study pursued credibility via triangulation and reflexivity.

Triangulation

Triangulation originates from land surveying terminology where multiple points are used to better locate oneself (Patton, 1999). Triangulation serves an important role in qualitative research as a means to ensure accurate findings through multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple analysts, and multiple theories of interpretation (Patton, 1999). Utilizing different methods together makes up for their individual limitations and highlights their individual benefits (Brewer & Hunter, 1989). This study utilized multiple focus group meetings with multiple participants to provide multiple sources of data. Each data source included specific characteristics that produce particular data, and when combined and analyzed, data could be triangulated to arrive at credible findings (Patton, 1999).

The foundation of a credible study is a comprehensive qualitative research design that includes well-established research methods (Shenton, 2004). Research methods that have proven to be credible and successful in prior studies continue to be credible when applied appropriately to current studies. This study incorporated accepted qualitative research methods into the general design of the study (Patton, 2015), and more specifically, respected methods for focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009) and data analysis (Glaser, 1965).

Another form of triangulation occurs through the usage of multiple analysts for data analysis (Patton, 1999). This study utilized multiple analysts in a variety of ways. Dissertation committee members served as facilitators of debriefing sessions with the researcher throughout the study to ensure that data, analysis, and findings were accurate and in line with the study as a whole (Shenton, 2004). Peer scrutiny provided by colleagues as a way to introduce a new perspective to the study and served as a type of external auditor who did not have a direct connection to the study yet could give feedback on the methods, data, and findings (Shenton, 2004; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity can be defined "as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality" and recognizing that "this position may affect the research process and outcome" (Berger, 2015, p. 220). As Patton (2002) and others have made clear, the researcher is the key instrument in a qualitative study such as this one, so examining researcher positionality and its potential impact on the study was essential. Finlay's (2002) conceptualization of reflexivity as five distinct approaches is helpful in effectively considering the total impact of researcher positionality. By approaching reflexivity as introspection, intersubjective reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique, and discursive deconstruction as proposed by Finlay (2002) instead of taking a singular view of reflexivity, it is possible to synthesize a more holistic interpretation of researcher positionality and its effect on the study. Of course, each approach warrants an extensive overview and application to this study, but as a framework to highlight key elements of my reflexivity in this particular project, it is effective in simpler terms.

Reflexivity as introspection focuses on the researcher and the internal dialogue that takes place within oneself to arrive at psychological thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes towards the external world (Finlay, 2002). This aspect of reflexivity is personal and highlights how particular beliefs and experiences lead me as the researcher to think and act in certain ways towards the research. In this study exploring racial diversity, my positionality as a white male living in a rural community leads me to experience school and society in different ways than racially diverse individuals.

Intersubjective reflection is an approach to reflexivity that considers the researcher in relation to others (Finlay, 2002). The participants of this study are African American high school students from the southern and northeast regions of Arkansas, whereas I am a white male living in Northwest Arkansas. Our perceptions of phenomenon are unique to our experiences, so the perceptions of participants on the development of student-teacher relationships must be considered from their perspective instead of my own.

Reflexivity as mutual collaboration takes into account the relationship between the researcher and participants and considers the influence participants may have on the study (Finlay, 2002). Participants are at the core of this study since each of them contributed the data for the project through their participation. Mutual collaboration takes place as the researcher collected data that was dependent on the participants, and further, the researcher analyzed the data and developed themes based on the information provided by the participants.

In attempting to "embrace the full analytic potential of qualitative forms of investigation" (Mykhalovskiy et al., 2018, p.615), there is some level of social critique

embedded in the study with the end goal of improved social justice and equity, so a social critique approach to reflexivity must also be considered. Teacher actions and student experiences at the core of the study imply a social dynamic, which lends itself to a social critique element at the conclusion of the project.

The final approach to reflexivity that Finlay (2002) proposes is reflexivity as discursive deconstruction, which highlights the ambiguity of language and how that impacts the expression of findings. The manner in which questions are phrased and presented can lead to particular interpretations by participants, which consequently influences the participants' responses.

Positioned as the instrument of project design, data collection and analysis, and results interpretation, I must be aware of several elements of my positionality that influence my approach to each of these aspects of qualitative research. I have arrived at my particular thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes through a lifetime of experiences, which are different than the experiences of anyone else. As a white male serving as a school leader with graduate degrees in educational leadership, I have developed certain ideas about society, school, and student-teacher relationships that likely vary from someone who has interacted in society and school in different ways. Specific to race, it is impossible for me to understand the dynamics of relationship development as an African American student, so I needed to be thoughtful and intentional in the way I developed this study and created interview questions so that I can gain better insight on the unique experiences of the participants of this study. It is important to recognize that I am an outsider to the communities of the participating students in more than one way. To begin, I am not African American, and there are particular aspects of the African American community

that I am not capable of understanding or qualified to attempt to interpret. Also, I am not personally connected or directly involved in the high schools where the study was conducted, so students will have no familiarity with me besides the introduction I provided in the study. There are several elements of my identity and positionality that I must be aware of and consider throughout the course of this study, but the specific dynamics of my role as a white male conducting research as an outsider are especially relevant to appropriately collecting data, analyzing findings, and developing conclusions.

Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology that will be utilized to conduct this qualitative, phenomenological study. After highlighting the purpose of this study, an explanation of the research design and sampling method was included. The chapter also explains the process by which data was collected and analyzed, and this involved an overview of focus groups and the constant comparative method, along with specific details relevant to this particular study in each of those areas. Finally, a section on credibility considered how the study took triangulation and the researcher's positionality and reflexivity into account to ensure a credible study.

Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to collect and understand the perceptions of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships. The study was guided by the following research question: What are the perceptions of African American high school students regarding the development of student-teacher relationships? Data was collected for this study utilizing open-ended interview questions in focus group meetings. Analysis of data was conducted through the constant comparative method, in which the data is transcribed and coded in an iterative process of comparison and recoding to identify essential themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Self-determination theory provided a framework to further examine data and inform the study's larger context of motivation, engagement, and relationships as it applies to student-teacher relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2019). This chapter provides a description of the sample population and presents the findings of the study organized into five sections based on the structure of the interview questions. Five primary sections of the interview protocol became apparent upon data collection and analysis: mentorship, views of school, school experiences, student-teacher relationships, and race and relationships.

Sample

Ten participants made up two focus groups, seven participants in one focus group and three in another focus group. These 10 participants were identified after a multi-layered approach to sampling was conducted. Initially, high schools were identified that met the study's criteria for an African American population above the national African American population percentage and earned an A or B on the Arkansas School Report

Card. Two of the 11 eligible high schools agreed to participate; each school's principal shared information with the school's African American students in grades 10, 11, and 12, and then provided an opportunity for interested students to indicate their willingness to participate through a secure online form. Participants were randomly selected from the pool of interested candidates.

The first focus group included seven students from the same high school. This group included two males and five females. The second focus group included three students from the same high school. This group included one male and two females. All participants self-identified as African American. In order to ensure anonymity for participants, pseudonyms were used to share participant responses in this study. It is worth noting that participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms, but participants in each focus group requested that their names remain attached to their responses. Since the necessity of anonymity would not allow participants' actual names to be reported in this study, participants were given pseudonyms connected to towns across the state of Arkansas that meet or exceed the national demographics for the African American population in order to provide anonymity yet not impose any researcher bias in selecting names for participants.

Findings

The structure of the interview protocol allowed for a natural organization of the findings of this study around five major sections: mentorship, views of school, school experiences, student-teacher relationships, and race and relationships. Interview questions used to guide the focus group meeting were designed to scaffold from general mentorship and school perceptions to more specific thoughts on student-teacher relationships and

race in an effort to address the full scope of the research question. Multiple interview questions contributed to the findings of each section. The five major themes were mentorship, views of school, school experiences, student-teacher relationships, and race and relationships.

Table 1
Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme
Mentorship	Mentors Qualities of Mentors
Views of School	General School Views Specific School Views
School Experiences	Elementary Memories Middle School, Junior High, High School Memories Negative Memories Memories Involving Teachers in School
Student-Teacher Relationships	Teacher Qualities Teacher Actions
Race and Relationships	Student Perceptions of Race Teacher Qualities Related to Race Teacher Actions Related to Race

Mentorship

Specific questions about participants' mentors outside of the classroom, qualities of those mentors, and participants' thoughts on mentor qualities in general made up the first section of the interview questions. These questions were intended to introduce the concept of relationships participants have with adults and highlight the qualities participants value in those relationships. The theme of mentorship is broken into two sub-themes: mentors and qualities of mentors.

Mentors. When asked to discuss a relationship with an adult outside of the classroom whom they consider a mentor, participants were slow to identify anyone

outside of their family. Family members as the primary mentors in participants' lives outside of the classroom was repeated throughout the discussion. Crossett said, "Really it's a lot of people in my family. But mainly I would say my mom and my dad." Stuttgart followed suit, saying, "For me, it would be my mom and my sister." Texarkana indicated she chose her mom since she rarely talks to anyone outside of school who could be considered a mentor when she responded, "I don't really talk to nobody outside of school for real, like, that'd be mentor, like, worthy I guess...So, I say my mom." Family members who were considered mentors included mothers, fathers, sisters, and grandmothers.

Two participants highlighted mentors outside of their family. Bryant said his friend's mother was a mentor to him, and Camden considered a woman from church her mentor. Junction City indicated he did not have a mentor when he responded, "I don't really talk to people but my friends." All participants except Crossett and Junction City only identified female mentors.

Qualities of Mentors. In discussing the qualities of specific mentors and the positive qualities of mentors in general, multiple common qualities were identified. The importance of listening and trying to understand was highlighted across responses. Bryant stated:

> What I think makes a good mentor is somebody that they'll listen and try to understand where you're coming from. They'll try to help you out best as they can with the situations that you're in, and always try to stick around.

Crossett emphasized the importance of trying to understand even if complete understanding is not possible:

> I feel like as long as they really listen to you and try to understand, even if they don't really understand, they just listen and get like your point of view from it. And, um, try to give you the best advice about it. And... just like try to feel you and stuff like that.

Another common quality of mentors brought up in both focus group meetings was helping participants make good decisions. This quality presented differently with each mentor, but the end result was support in making good decisions. Lonoke explained how her mother exhibited this quality:

> Because, um, she's a firm believer in, um, tough love. Like, she's gonna tell you how it is no matter what, she's gonna make sure you're going on the right path even if it hurts your feelings, and sometimes it needs to hurt your feelings for you to understand what she's saying. She's gonna say it, and that's what everyone or some people need as a mentor, is someone that's gonna push you, love you, but also gonna tell you right and make sure you're doing the right thing.

Bryant indicated that his friend’s mother demonstrated this quality as well:

> She always just trying to put us in the best situations. And when I came down here and I was kinda, you know, just wasn't in the right place, 'cause I just moved from a, a horrible area, she always tried to put me in the best situations, to kinda be the best.

In sharing general qualities of good mentors, Texarkana highlighted the importance of this quality when she said, “I don't know, like, pushes you, and... You know, they tell

you... They call you on your- like, your mess. You know, they'll tell you when you're not doing right."

The leadership and character of the mentor was another common quality shared by participants. Stuttgart touched on the strength and leadership of her mentors by saying, "also to me, though, um, they would be strong and show good leadership. Because all of my mentors have led me in the right direction whenever I'm going astray." Texarkana echoed the value of leadership by example in her response, "They try to, like, you know, keep you going, you know? Uh, they just be, like, a good example. Like, leading, they lead by example. Like, they don't necessarily tell you what to do, but they, like...Show you."

Views of School

In order to understand the mindset of participants regarding school as well as the context in which student-relationships are built, participants were asked about their views on school in general along with their views of their specific school. Participants were asked to share their initial reactions to the thought of school, and the responses were overwhelmingly related to schoolwork and the pressure of school. Responses along these lines included "Work," "Being stressed out all the time," "Worrying about your grades," "Due dates and deadlines," and "Stress." Additional responses came from Bryant who thought about "Waking up early" and "Teachers." For Junction City, school made him think about a "Jailhouse." Texarkana was an outlier in her positive response, saying "I don't know, school's kinda fun for me."

Specific School Views. Following the discussion of school in general, participants were asked to respond to the idea of their own school. Responses were varied

and reflected the unique environments of both respective schools involved in the study. In addition to the responses to the prompt about initial reactions to the thought of their school, data identified through the constant comparative method of coding and analysis as appropriate to this section were included as well.

A topic of discussion in one focus group highlighted the school's emphasis on rules that some of the participants felt were misplaced and needed improvement. For example, Jonesboro indicated the need for improvement while also acknowledging that her school was still better than most schools in this regard:

> Think it needs improvement in some places. Like I mean sometimes like I don't remember like the rules either, but compared to a lot of other schools, we got it way better. Like we can at least still have our phones. Um, but some of the rules they make up as time goes on and problems come up, they could come up with better solutions.

Malvern expanded on Jonesboro's response by saying, "Um, like Jonesboro said, we need a lot of improvement. Sometimes I feel like they worry more about other things than the important things."

One focus group immediately brought up school pride when asked about their school. Texarkana said, "I think our, like, pride for our school… I don't know, you, like, bleed blue." Junction City thought about the student section, saying it is "One of the best around here," which gave Texarkana the opportunity to claim that "We show out everywhere we go."

When thinking about their schools, multiple participants also brought up teachers, both collectively as a whole staff at the school and individual teachers. Lonoke responded

to the question twice, starting with an overall view of the quality of teachers at the school and highlighting a specific teacher:

> We have, like, really good teachers here. Like, Ms. M, I love my teacher Ms. M, she's, like, one of the best teachers here. Like, just how she is, how she treats us, she's probably... I wish I had more teachers like that, like, throughout my entire going to school life.

Texarkana echoed those sentiments in talking about another teacher at the school and her feelings about the teachers overall:

> Like, she loves to teach and so- so, like, she does a good job teaching, but, like, she also makes sure that you know, like, she cares. You know, like, we have some good teachers here, so I could say that. That's what makes school, like, way better, 'cause if we didn't have good teachers I wouldn't come.

Further along in the conversation, Lonoke added that “those teachers really prioritize mental health, not just work.”

Across both focus groups, participants included positive feelings about their respective schools to go along with any potentially critical remarks. For example, Texarkana added the disclaimer, “But don't get me wrong, I love my school,” to one of her responses. Similar statements can be found in responses from multiple participants as they explain memories of school or interactions with teachers. Dermott clearly stated that, “Like middle school and high school?.. My best years. Um, time of my life in school.”

School Experiences

The full range of school experiences from kindergarten through high school were included in this study. Participants were asked to recall their best memories specifically

from elementary school as well as junior high and high school. Next, participants were asked if they could share a negative memory from any level of school. Finally, participants were asked to share any experiences that stand out from any level of school that involved a teacher.

Elementary memories. In discussing memories from elementary school, participants consistently recalled special events and free time. Special events included such activities as the 100th Day of School, Dr. Seuss Day, Career Day, and a water activity day. Malvern remembered the 100th Day of School as her best memory of elementary school:

> Um, one thing, one thing I can remember is 100 Day. It was when I was in like, I think it was like kindergarten through second grade. It was like where kids got to be so creative. Like they could put like 100 cereals on shirts and stuff like that. That was really fun.

Texarkana, who attends a different school than Malvern, concurred that the 100th Day of School was an elementary highlight for her. Bryant fondly remembered Career Day from his elementary school years:

> Um, Career Day. Career Day was hard... It just, um, seeing people parents come to the school and it's like a bunch of different stuff like you could see, like jobs you ain't even know back then.

Lonoke brought up Dr. Seuss Day as her favorite elementary school memory:

> My favorite memory is, um, Dr. Seu- Seuss Day? I think that's how you pronounce his name? Yeah, anyway. It was just, like, every holiday, it was so much fun. It was, like, the little, um, Leprechaun would, like, come and mess up

> the room and we would eat green eggs and ham for, like, the Dr. Seuss Day and read books. Like, that's where my love of reading came from is that.

Another special event brought up in the focus group meeting was Fun in the Sun, which Jonesboro highlighted:

> Um, do y'all remember Fun in the Sun? I love Fun in the Sun...Like it was in I believe like intermediate school. And they would bring water slides out and we had water games. And we had like snow cones and all kinds of snacks. It was fun.

Another common theme in participants' memories of elementary schools was the relaxed nature of elementary school and the incorporation of more free time through activities such as recess, nap time, and snack time. Camden summed up this sentiment when she said, "And the free time that we had. It wasn't like we had to do this by this time." Stuttgart reflected on enjoying childhood during elementary school, saying, "Uh, just playing on the playground. And enjoying just being a child. 'Cause that's something I'll never get back."

Two participants remembered elementary school negatively and hesitated to identify a positive memory. Junction City responded to the prompt by saying, "See, for me, I don't really have any good memories from elementary because I was a bad child." However, upon further along in the discussion, he came back to a positive memory he held:

> I do got a memory about that...Fourth grade math, uh, block...So, our teacher, you know, with Ms. W...She would pull up this, um, multiplication game on the board...Like, we had to pick teams and go against each other, I think that made me

> real competitive right there...'Cause I like to win, but first I'ma try to get everything right.

Similarly, Texarkana began by saying elementary school was not good for her but proceeded to recall the 100th Day of School as a positive memory:

> Um, let me see. I didn't- I don't even think I have any for real. I didn't like elementary, elementary was not good. (laughs) Uh...I guess, like, maybe first grade when we had, like, the 100th day of school. Everybody got to, like, decorate their shirt with, like, 100 things on it

Memories of Middle School, Junior High, or High School. Moving on to memories of middle school, junior high, or high school, participants were asked about their best memory from those grade levels. Participants tended to focus on middle school and junior high in their responses. Similar to responses for best elementary school memories, responses for best memory middle school, junior high, or high school were primarily special events or the perceived relaxed nature of middle school and junior high. Dermott provided the singular response that did not fit within those two categories, when he said, "Um, my favorite memories from middle school and high school, was just really football... I mean, it just made me who I am. It built my character."

Special events made up the bulk of responses as participants highlighted pep rallies, awards assemblies, field day, and specific athletic events. Camden immediately brought up the pep rallies and the good times everyone had during the rallies, saying, "The pep rallies...Um, depending on who we were up against, we would dress a certain way. And we would play different games, and we would just, you know, have a good time." Texarkana said, "Probably, yeah, when we used to have those three on three

tournaments," and Lonoke and Junction City agreed that the basketball tournaments at lunch were a positive memory from junior high. After concurring about the three on three basketball tournaments, Lonoke added that her dance team winning state runner-up was another positive memory from junior high. Crossett remembered the awards assemblies as her best memory from junior high. Field Day was a best memory for Jonesboro, who said, "Field Day...We still do Field Day, but it was better back then. Like we'd get to go to the track and it was like, I don't know, it was just fun." Stuttgart identified Battle of the Classes as her favorite memory, and she said, "Battle of the Classes...Um, each grade would like compete against each other, uh, while playing games. And, it was during Homecoming Week."

The relaxed atmosphere of middle school and junior high was another positive memory participants had from that time. For example, Bryant stated, "Um, stuff wasn't really that serious. Like you can just really just live." Similarly, Jonesboro followed that statement with, "Yeah, a lotta easier classes you didn't really too much have to study for."

Negative Memories. Participants were asked to recall a negative memory from any level of school, and responses were varied in terms of grade level and type of memory. Multiple responses included memories from previous schools in different communities. Responses on negative memories tended to be longer and require more explanation than best memories from elementary school and middle school, junior high, or high school. Participants were asked in the next section about memories involving a teacher; however, all negative memories responding to the specific interview prompt are included in this section, even those involving teachers, since participants were responding to the question about negative memories of school.

Lonoke shared a negative memory from her time in another school when she felt left out on a field trip and spent the entire time with her teacher:

> Um, a bad memory? Okay, so at [Previous School] every year we had, like, an end of the year field trip where we went somewhere...And my worst memory is, um, me being left out. (laughs) 'Cause- 'cause everybody else was just, like, (laughs) doing their own little thing and I was just by myself. So, I went with my teacher, uh, [Teacher Name] and...Like, that's how our bond got stronger 'cause I was by myself (laughs) the entire time. So yeah, that was that.

Jonesboro had negative memories of rules imposed due to fights from underclassmen at their school:

> Um, all the fights that caused to have yellow passes to go anywhere in the school and only go to the bathroom like once or twice a week...Basically, all the, um, like Freshmen and Sophomores that came in just trying, basically just fought over little stuff. And it happened so many times. Like I remember it was like four times in a day. Where they had to issue yellow passes to go anywhere in the halls or anywhere...And if you didn't have it, then you'd get like D-hall.

Bryant recalled a sixth grade boy getting tackled for bringing a knife to school when he was in Texas:

> Um, since sixth grade, when I was in Texas, we had to walk through metal detectors like before we came to school...And like there was this kid that I guess was getting bullied or whatever and... Well, mind you, this like a, it's a public school and like where I was living, there was only like two White people in the

> whole school. And like I guess the kid was getting bullied or something. He brought a knife through the metal detectors and the police just tackled him.

Junction City told how he received ISS in his first year at a new school for his negative memory of school:

> The first time I came to [School District] in fifth grade... I got ISS. Because, um, we was taking some type of test, we just finished and I, um, cut out some words, replaced the words and made it a bad word and stuff like that, got some ISS.

Dermott shared a broader memory of an entire school as his negative memory:

> Um, [Intermediate School]. Um, I mean, it was just, I don't know why, but just like trouble was following me everywhere I went in [Intermediate School]. Like it was all, never a day where I didn't get in trouble. And a lot of the times, I didn't even do nothing.

Some negative memories involved the actions of teachers or adults in the school, and three responses included adults participating in the interaction or experience that led to the negative memory. Jonesboro recalled a previous principal’s actions after a student committed suicide:

> Oh, also I remember, um, this Senior, his name was J-, he committed suicide. And there was a cross put on his parking spot. And the past principal took it off the second everyone left. Like they waiting till everyone left his cross just to take it down. So that, I didn't like that at all.

Texarkana remembered a negative experience with a sixth grade teacher who accused her and another student of cheating on a test:

> Like, it was English class and we had a vocabulary test, okay? And, like, they had, like, the little cardboard, like, dividers set up or whatever, and the teacher swore we was cheating on this vocabulary test, and she (laughs) took us out to the hallway. Right? And I got to sit in the hallway every day in sixth grade. But, like, she called us out in the hallway 'cause she said we was cheating on this test, because our answers... Like, we had made a 100 on it...And then we wasn't cheating, so, like, the whole time we're trying to... Uh, we're out in the hallway trying to explain to her how we wasn't cheating, and I just thought that was, like, a bad memory 'cause I think she called my momma and I didn't even do nothing. Like, I literally had studied for the test.

Jonesboro shared an additional negative memory about an elementary school physical education teacher:

> Oh, Elementary School, there was this male PE teacher...I hated him...He'd like scream at us like we were grown...I thought he was weird. I hated that man...He was crazy...He, like everybody, he like screamed at us kids like we were like grown men.

Experiences Involving Teachers in School. Participants were asked to share an experience from school that involved a teacher. Responses were varied and ranged from classroom memories to extracurricular activities. Dermott recalled a time in middle school where his relationships with his teachers led them to dress up with a common saying of his for a special event:

> In middle school, we had Dress Up Days...It, it was like... The teachers were cool. Like I don't know why, like I became cool with the teachers...And they, I used to have like this little "Know what I'm saying?" thing. Like I used to say that all the time. "You know what I'm saying?"...And, um, they had like made these, made these shirts and like all the teachers wore them that said, "Know what I'm saying?"

Lonoke talked about her fourth grade teacher who rewarded students with an All Star jersey:

> Okay. So, I was in the fourth grade and I had this teacher, his name was [Teacher Name], and he would have this thing called All Stars. So, if you did good, like, throughout the entire week, you, uh, was able to wear his All Star jersey, and, um, you was able to get something out of- out of the little treasure box.

Texarkana added her memory from seventh grade math in comparison to elementary school, saying, “Seventh grade math was good with Ms. Tilly. Like, she was, like, the first teacher I ever had that, like, taught for real. 'Cause, you know, coming from elementary, like, they yelled a lot.” Crossett remembered her relationship with her basketball coach as an experience with a teacher that stood out, and she considers the role of race in that relationship:

> Well, I have memories with, when I played basketball and my basketball. We were cool, so like it was always fun being around him. 'Cause-...I don't know if it's, if it has to do with like the race, 'cause he's Black too...But it's just like, it's more easy to talk to him

Lonoke brought up an incident from the previous year where a teacher stood up for her in a situation involving race with another situation:

> Well, um, last year we had a predicament when someone was being racist towards me, and a teacher was, like... I don't know, she stood up for me of course, I mean, uh, that's the right thing to do, but it's how she stood up. Like, she told us that she has a, um, a Black grandbaby 'cause her kids adopted a Black child. And... Yeah. Like, I don't know, it- it had its faults but, like... I don't know, I don't know how to explain it. But that kinda stood out to me 'cause it was just, like, "Oh, that's nice." But some things she shouldn't have said, 'cause they try to stand up for you but also say the wrong things.

Student-Teacher Relationships

The next phase of questions moved towards a more narrow focus on student-teacher relationships. Participants were asked to discuss a teacher they liked and why they liked that teacher, and then they were prompted to share their description of a good student-teacher relationship. Next, participants shared specific things teachers have done to build good relationships with students. Responses in this section are organized by teacher qualities and teacher actions.

Teacher Qualities. Teacher qualities earned a distinct code in the constant comparative method of data analysis because the data was clear that some characteristics of teachers in building strong student-teacher relationships were personality traits or internal qualities that teachers possessed rather than actions or behaviors. Responses varied among participants, but there were six qualities that stood out as repetitive and

expressed by multiple participants: care, laid-back personality, personal connections, knowing students, understanding, and not mad all the time.

Participants regularly brought up the quality of care when they discussed teachers they liked or what made a good student-teacher relationship. Texarkana communicated the importance of care clearly when discussing a teacher she liked, saying, “And she cares more... Like, she loves to teach and so- so, like, she does a good job teaching, but, like, she also makes sure that you know, like, she cares.” Lonoke believes that students need more teachers who care, so she said, “Someone that actually cares, that's what we need. More teachers that show us that they care and act like it.”

Teachers who exhibited a more laid-back personality were also favored among participants. Stuttgart described teachers who were down to earth as her favorite. Whereas Crossett used the words chill and laid back to describe her favorite teacher. Junction City also talked about a teacher who built good relationships with students as someone who had a “chill vibe.”

Participants in both focus group meetings discussed how teachers who built personal connections and treated student more informally at times were liked by students. Dermott explained how one teacher felt more like a friend than a teacher because she was willing to help him with anything:

> Um, I mean, it felt like she was like more of a friend than a teacher to me...And is, it wasn't, and I could tell her and then it was like she always had my back in any situation. And helped me throughout school.

Stuttgart referenced teachers breaking from the teacher act and being more personable with students when she said, “When they don't, you know, like have like the teacher act

all the time and actually act like, you know, a person like you." A dialogue between Lonoke and Junction City serves as an appropriate summary of participants' views on personal connections between students and teachers:

> Junction City: And they're, like, not- not making it all about teacher-student, it's like... Yeah.
>
> Lonoke: It's like some type of connection. It's not just, like, a standstill and standby, like..
>
> Junction City: Like, "I teach, you listen." It's not like that.
>
> Lonoke: Yeah, it's, "Do you need help? Hey, interact with me."
>
> Junction City: Yeah.
>
> Lonoke: "I can help you with this."
>
> Junction City: Alright, if you don't wanna talk about school, we can talk about other stuff.
>
> Lonoke: Yeah.
>
> Junction City: Like sports, um, other stuff outside of school and things like that.
>
> Lonoke: Like, "How was your weekend? Are you okay?" And stuff like that.

Knowing students, specifically their unique personalities and being able to tell when something is wrong, is another quality of teachers that participants thought helped develop strong student-teacher relationships. Malvern brought up a teacher who "knows all our different personalities," which prompted her to say, "And he just, he makes my day." Describing teachers who know their students and reach out when something is wrong, Texarkana summarized her point that "They can always tell when something's wrong with you too," and "It's like they know their students."

Teachers who are understanding were also viewed more favorably by participants. When asked about the qualities of a good student-teacher relationship, Camden expressed that the teachers should be “understanding” and “a good listener.” Stuttgart expanded on the concept of understanding by explaining, “When they're understanding of things. Like kind of what Bryant said. Um, like if you forget homework or something, they don't like bash you and go crazy. They just allow you to, um, turn it in.”

Participants shared that students are more inclined to build relationships with teachers who are not mad or too serious all the time. Bryant talked about teachers not being mad all the time and taking it out on students, saying, “And when the teacher is not, not, not mad all the time. That, that's another one. 'Cause sometime the teacher just, just be mad and trying to take it out on students.” Jonesboro added that she wanted a teacher who was “not so serious all the time.” Lonoke focused on teachers not bringing their anger from outside the classroom into the classroom when she said, “They won't, like, bring their outside life into work. Meaning, like, if they're angry they won't take it out on us. Like, most of these teachers do that.”

Teacher Actions. Actions or behaviors of teachers made up a significant portion of participant responses on why they liked particular teachers or what they felt promoted good student-teacher relationships, so teacher actions were divided into two categories: individual actions and collective actions. Individual actions are those actions specifically directed at the participant or conducted singularly, as opposed to a collective action, which affected the whole class or a group of students.

Individual Actions. Participants recalled specific actions taken by teachers at different points in school that stood out to strengthen their relationship. Intentionally

checking in with students, sharing with students, and going beyond the basic responsibilities of teaching to support students appeared to be key individual actions for participants. For Texarkana, checking in with students when they were not at their best was a meaningful way to build a connection. She talked about two different teachers, one in high school and one in junior high, who went out of their way to make sure she and other students were alright. She explained how one of her high school teachers slid a note to students when they were not actively engaged in class:

> So like, I realized, like, when students aren't saying something in class... Like, it may be, like, two days or something, she may, like, leave them a note, like, after class or something. Or, like, she'll send 'em an email or something like that, you know? Like, she can tell that you haven't been, like, participating 'cause you haven't been yourself, so, like, I like that 'cause, like, at least they pay attention. Like, they know you're not on... Like, we know when the teachers aren't feeling it, you know? But, like, they can also tell when you're not in it, so.

She also highlighted a junior high teacher later in the discussion who would pull students aside when she felt something was going on with them:

> Like, I don't know, like, she would just be, like... If you weren't having a good day or something like that, like, she could always tell and she'd, like, pull you over to the side or something, you know? I don't know, she was a really good teacher.

Another action that stood out to multiple participants was sharing things with students, such as snacks or drinks. Junction City told how one teacher would give out free water bottles. Texarkana talked about one teacher who would bake cupcakes for students

on their birthday. Lonoke brought up a teacher who would share snacks with students anytime she had them.

Teachers' willingness to go beyond the basic responsibilities of teaching was also helpful for building relationships. Bryant explained how an elementary school teacher actually gave him a ride to school when he was struggling with transportation, "I needed some help, you know, just getting to school, I needed a way to school...And she actually came and picked me up for like two months." Lonoke remembered a favorite teacher from a previous school who would allow her to accompany her to dance competitions:

> She always took her time to reach out to my mom to see if I could go with her, and she was a step. A step is, like, a- a dance team, she was always a... She was a dance teacher, so I used to always go with her in her, uh, competitions.

Stuttgart had a teacher who was willing to help her with assignments for other classes and shared when discussing actions that encouraged good relationships, "Like she'll help you with things outside of just her class. And she's helped me with, um, a few essays for other teachers that I've had." Camden recalled a teacher in kindergarten who reached out to her parents to let them know she was going to get Camden where she needed to be:

> Um, in kindergarten, uh, I probably wasn't the smartest... But it is kindergarten or whatever. And, um, the teacher, she, uh, she contacted my parents or whatever and she was like, um, "I see where she's at and I know where she needs to go, and I can help her get there."

Collective Actions. Collective actions are those actions or behaviors directed at and benefiting multiple students or a whole class, as opposed to individual actions that are directed at a single student at a time. Six teacher collective actions came up

throughout the discussion and their importance to participants became apparent: letting students get to know them, being understanding and not bashing students for mistakes, not overloading students with work, doing fun or light-hearted things in class, making efforts to understand and help students, and treating everyone equally.

One collective action that teachers performed that led to better relationships was letting students get to know them. Jonesboro clearly states, “And, um, I also think when the teacher allows you to get to know them better, then that also helps in making a good teacher-student relationship.” Later, she expanded on this concept by highlighting a specific coach who made things relatable to him:

> My Cross Country and Track coach, he just kinda made everything relatable to him. And he was very understanding of a lot of things. And also being in Cross Country and Track, it made for a lotta different memories and experiences, so with that, I just got closer to him.

Junction City added a similar idea that a teacher with good relationships with students “treats you like family” and builds a more personal connection.

Participants felt that teachers who were understanding and did not bash students when they made mistakes had better relationships as well. Bryant brought up how teachers he connected with “Like they don't, like they don't bash you for not like not doing something. 'Cause like sometimes just you just forget and like the teacher just completely just go off on you just 'cause you forgot.” Stuttgart followed up on Bryant’s point about teachers not bashing students and simply letting them turn in a forgotten assignment.

Recognizing the lives of students outside of school and not overloading them with work was another positive collective action of teachers who had good relationships with students. Jonesboro appreciated that one of her former teachers “didn't overload us with work. And she did what she could to make it easy on us.” Lonoke felt she had better relationships with teachers who “don't bombard you with stuff.”

An assortment of actions that might be considered fun or light-hearted helped promote student-teacher relationships as well. Bryant recalled his teachers in elementary school making learning activities fun by participating with them or going outside:

> 'Cause like when we did work, like they didn't just give us the work and tell us to do it. Like they like, they gave us activities to do and they did it with us. We went outside and like we thought we was playing. We was doing schoolwork outside. Like it, it was really fun.

Junction City thought it was a positive characteristic for teachers to “laugh and joke with you.” Bryant supported that notion by mentioning that teachers who had good relationships with students were “Just somebody that try to put a smile on people face.” Texarkana remembered fondly one of her teachers playing music in class, which helped create a positive atmosphere in the classroom.

Teachers who made an effort to understand and help students were recognized for their attempts to build relationships. Bryant thought it was good when teachers tried to understand and help, which he explained, “And like when they try to understand where you're coming from and they doing everything they can to try to help you, that, that is good.” Malvern brought up a teacher who she described as someone who “loves all of us and he knows all our different personalities.” Texarkana talked about a teacher who was

available and willing to help with any problem by saying, “If you ever have a problem you can ask her.” Bryant highlighted a teacher who made extra efforts to help students be successful in her class:

> She just always, you know, tried to help you like just like if you didn't finish like an essay on time, like she'll give you an extra day or something. You could come in in Homeroom and try to, as long as you trying, come in in Homeroom and try to finish it. She just tried her best to get you the best grade in her class.

Another collective action that came up in discussion and became more heavily discussed later in the focus group meeting was the concept of treating everyone equally. Stuttgart brought equality up when asked how teachers can build good relationships with students. In further discussion on the impact of race on student-teacher relationships, equality was a repeated theme in the conversations.

Race and Student-Teacher Relationships

The focus of this study is the perception of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships, so a portion of the focus group meeting was dedicated to understanding participant perceptions of race and its impact in school and on student-teacher relationships. This section begins with consideration of participants’ views on race in general followed by their views on race in school. Next, participants explain particular racial issues that occurred at school or involved school officials. Finally, participants share teacher qualities and actions related to race that have contributed to building student-teacher relationships. As with the findings on student-teacher relationships in general, this section distinguishes between teacher qualities and teacher actions.

Perceptions of Race in General. Throughout discussions on school, race, and teachers, the opportunity for participants to share their views on the broader topic of race was available. A common theme was that participants felt they must succeed in life because they have something to prove as African American men and women. Lonoke explained why she has the attitude that failure is not an option:

> Yeah. I don't wanna say it's pride, but it's something that I can't do is fail, 'cause I wanna show the world that, "Yes I come from a small town, yes I'm in a White school, yes I will be on the top." That's what my mentality is.

Junction City felt that he has “something to prove” to make the point that “you can be successful.”

In discussing things that are acceptable in society and things that are not acceptable, Lonoke elaborated on the concept of boundaries for all races:

> Boundaries, and it's a Christian thing, everybody needs to know is boundaries. And that's not even just White people, that's Black people. Like, everybody needs to learn boundaries because some stuff you can say and some stuff you can't, it's respecting boundaries that everyone needs to learn

An exchange between Lonoke and Junction City highlights some of the feelings of participants discussed in the focus group meeting as it relates to race and society:

> Junction City: Like, stop thinking Black people can't be successful too, stop thinking we're just gonna end up dead or in jail. Or selling dope in the streets. Like, come on now.
>
> Lonoke: Or pregnant with a lot of children for Black women.

Junction City: Yeah, yeah, like, they're thinking White people are more successful. Like, we can be successful too, we are successful too, like…

Lonoke: It's just that we don't have that opp-... We don't have opportunities sometimes like a White person.

Junction City: Yeah, like, a White person, they have way more opportunity.

Perceptions of Race in School. Besides thoughts on race in general, participants shared their perceptions of race in the school setting. Responses varied, but a few common themes emerged across the data: how participants must code-switch to fit in, how White students inappropriately try to fit in, and how participants felt about school attempts to address race.

One concept that came up on multiple occasions was the idea that African American students have to act a certain way to fit in to avoid being judged in predominantly White schools. Junction City compared his experiences in another school, which was a primarily Black school, to his current school, which is predominantly White:

> You know, I went to an all Black school so, like... Like, everybody fit in real good, you can be yourself. Like, down here, nah, sometimes you feel like you gotta do this and that, like, pretending or something just to not be judged.

Similarly, Lonoke shared her perception of race in predominantly Black schools compared to predominantly White schools, and specifically how African American students were forced to act in order to fit in:

> I went to a school called [School Name], and that's predominantly Black just like I went to [School Name], and those are two totally different environments from, you know, the two different- three different schools. So, it's different because one

> environment, everybody is used to how everybody's acting, and in this environment it's, like, you have to act this certain way or that certain way or you'll get judged by how you are.

Texarkana has not attended school in any other district, but she explains how she must change certain behaviors from her traditional home behaviors in an effort to fit in, which she likens to having two faces:

> But, like, you dress different from, like, what's not at home, or, like, at... Like, you know, family, you know, you dress different 'cause you know they may say something about what you got on. Or, like, you know, you just have to, like, say different stuff that you wouldn't, like, say at home and stuff like that. Like, not, like, bad stuff, but I mean, like, you can't really be one with your culture all the way 'cause you know they don't understand, you know?...But, I mean, that's all I ever know, so, I mean, I'll just kinda look at it normal now. You just gotta have two different kinda, like, faces basically.

Lonoke uses the terminology of two faces as well when she shares how she changes certain behaviors to fit in without realizing it:

> Sometimes it's... like, I- sometimes I'm not aware, but when I sit down and actually talk about it, it's just like, "Dang, I'm really putting on a two-face." And I hate two-faces because I wanna be myself all the time.

Another perception participants had about race and school was the unwelcomed efforts of White students to prove they are not racist or attempt to fit in with African American students. Bryant acknowledges that conversations about race may be awkward

for White students, but he explains that efforts by White students to prove they are not racist can create further tension:

> Um, like when they, like if you in the class when they get to talking about, you know, different things that happened to Black people a long time ago, like I guess it, it make them feel kinda awkward and they, like Jonesboro said, like they just feel like they gotta prove that they not racist or whatever. That, like I don't know what, like it just creates tension. It's like, it's, it's weird.

Bryant also mentioned that when conversations about race take place in class, it is not uncommon that "some of the White kids started eyeballing me." Junction City expressed his confusion with his White friends who say things to try and fit in:

> You know, it- sometimes we feel like... When you're speaking to, like, White friends and stuff like that, they say certain things just, like, to make you feel like they're trying to fit in and stuff. It just be like, "Why?"

Some participants also felt that schools do not fully address racial issues because of the potential for conflict or problems with parents or community members. Malvern shared that she felt that her school did not take action when racial things have happened:

> Um, um, like there has been some instances where racial things have happened at our school and nothing has ever been done. But when it comes to other things, um, it's not really a big deal to them, I feel like.

Jonesboro recognized the potential conflict that might come from addressing racial issues and suggested that schools cannot be afraid of that conflict, saying, "And I feel like schools, especially in like p- in schools in places like Arkansas, um, I think schools can't really be afraid of... how do I say, the conflict that'll come with addressing the racist

situations."

Interactions Involving Race. This section focuses on interactions related to race and involving school officials in order to better understand the context in which participants are building relationships. Two common concepts emerged that encompassed a range of actions: adults standing up for African American students and adults making assumptions about African American students.

Participants willingly shared experiences where teachers or principals stood up for them when racist acts were taking place. Texarkana and Junction City bragged on their principal for his actions in addressing racist situations. For example, Junction City was having issues with students from another student section at a basketball game saying inappropriate things, so the principal intervened and made them stop:

> First time we played [School Name], at their place, and [Principal] is at the game and stuff like that. And, like, two of the [School Name] dudes that I got problems with and stuff like that, they was recording me so I started getting loud trying to see, you know, if they wanted to fight and stuff like that, and saw another dude that I didn't know. Even he was, like, [inaudible 00:43:35] and stuff like that. I'm like, "Who are you?" Type stuff, and [Principal], he got... He took my back, he was telling him, "Don't talk to me." And stuff like that, watch his players 'cause they were the ones doing all the extra stuff.

Texarkana also shared an instance where the principal put a stop to another student being racist towards her, saying that the principal "does not play about that race game." Lonoke

added an example of a teacher sticking up for students when an opposing student section was being racist:

> And remember, [Teacher Name] went off on a student on the- the student section that one time? I'm pretty sure I heard about it. Um, they were being racist towards the, um, our student section or something, and [Teacher Name] went off on 'em.

Adults standing up for African American students when racial issues arise enhance student-teacher relationships, but on the other hand, participants shared experiences of adults making assumptions related to race that were racist or at the least wrong that were detrimental to student-teacher relationships. Texarkana told the story of one teacher addressing a question about watermelon towards her in class when she was the only African American student in the class:

> He's talking about watermelon and I happen to be the only Black person in there, okay? Because the other one was absent that day. So, it was me, I'm a Black person, then there was a Mexican, okay? And the rest is White. He gonna ask me... Um, he said... So, he's talking about watermelon, he said, "You know, because, you know, ya'll's people eat watermelon." And- (laughs) and I'm just, like, "How do you know I like watermelon?" 'Cause, you know, I may- I may hate watermelon. But, like, it was just the stereotype for me. Like, he- he did that, like, kinda often. Like, he'd, like, say something about, like, fried chicken or something.

Lonoke talked about the tension with a teacher who assumed she always had an attitude based on the way she speaks:

> It was a problem like that with me my 10th grade year where it was, like, she

> always thought I had an attitude with her. No, the way that I'm speaking to you right now is how I speak to her, because sometimes the way she comes off I didn't like it, so I told her how I felt. So, it was always a situation with her and a Black student.

Bryant recalled a fourth grade teacher who made assumptions about the discipline African American students receive at home:

> And she was, was like we was all talking about like how we get whoopings in class and stuff. Like, you know, 'cause I don't know, that's just something we talk about...And we was talking about getting whoopings, and she ended up, like she said, she said something about getting, getting beat with a, with a extension cord. And like she started laughing, and everybody was just, just looked at her. Like she was trying too hard to like relate to us. And it was weird.

Lonoke also brought up an instance where a teacher questioned whether her hair was a wig when she let her hair grow out:

> I remember I was, um, wearing my afro out. It was for Crazy Hair Day eighth grade year, and a teacher came to me and asked me, "Was my hair a wig?" I do not like when I get that question because it's, like... Uh, they're saying that Black people cannot have a lot of hair, which is untrue.

Teacher Qualities Related to Race. Participants were asked about positive experiences with a teacher of a different race as well as with a teacher of the same race as them. They were also asked for their thoughts on whether they felt that race influenced their relationships with teachers. Specific qualities of teachers related to race appeared to be more challenging for participants to identify beyond what was addressed in teacher

qualities for student-teacher relationships in general. Lonoke felt that African American teachers understood African American students better than White teachers did, simply stating, “Because they understand.” Stuttgart described the only African American teacher she has had and whom she felt connected with but who White students did not like because of her teaching style:

> It makes me feel more connected. Because I've only had one African American teacher, and that was my eighth grade year. Um, and she was like really helpful. And like my other classmates just really didn't like her, because she had a different style of teaching than our White teachers, because she was really smart and she knew a lot and whenever she would like tell us like facts and stuff, we would be like, "She's just trying to do this or trying to do that," and she was just doing her job.

Bryant went further to explain how African American teachers can relate with African American students easier and can understand the households of African American students better than White teachers:

> Feel like they can, they can, um, relate to you better. Like they know the type of things that go on inside the household that other races might not know what's going... I mean, I'm not saying it couldn't happen in a White household. But like most of the time, the stuff that go on, they can relate. And they know how to relate.

Texarkana talked about a White teacher who is easy to talk to, does not judge students, and is not racist, “She's real cool, you know, we can talk about stuff. You know, she doesn't judge or nothing, she's definitely not racist, I like her.”

Teacher Actions Related to Race. Participants shared multiple instances of teachers taking particular actions related to race that promoted stronger student-teacher relationships. The most dominant themes throughout the focus group meetings were the treatment of African American students as equal to all other students and teachers being educated on issues relevant to students.

As for the importance of treating all students equally, Junction City stated clearly, "Yeah, like, treat us 100% equal. Not 50, not 75, not 99, but 100%." Lonoke agreed, saying "Just don't see us differently. Just...Treat us the same as you would as a White student." Stuttgart spoke against showing favoritism to White students, "Um, not showing favoritism to the White students who have like lot of money and kind of ganging up with them. Um, kinda treating everyone the same." Texarkana added that teachers should not set lower expectations for African American students, "Like, I would say don't set certain expectations for us. Like, it's like they kinda set their standards lower for, like, people of color."

Participants appreciated when teachers were educated on issues relevant to students. Stuttgart shared how her teacher was educated on important issues and helped her collect information for an essay about the African American mortality rate:

> For me, it would be when, um, my teacher showed that she, um, is educated on issues that are going on in the world. Because I did an essay over, um, the mortality rate of African Americans and she actually gave me information and websites where I could look up things because she was educated on the thing as well.

Malvern highlighted a specific teacher and expressed her appreciation for that teacher

taking the time to research issues relevant to African Americans:

> Um, there is one specific teacher that I do know that has taken the time out to actually research and learn about, you know, African American, you know, things and stuff like that. And I really appreciate her for doing that.

Camden spoke fondly of a teacher who was not African American yet still made an effort to understand her African American students:

> She would always be there. And she tried her best to understand, because it is hard to understand, you know, if you're not the same race sometimes. So she did her best to understand. And she always helped us too.

Jonesboro felt that a teacher sharing a personal story about her daughter dating an African American and withstanding criticism from the neighbors was helpful in building a relationship with her:

> Um, my ninth grade English teacher, she shared with me this story one time where she had moved here from somewhere up North and her daughter wanted to date this Black guy and she, he came over to their house one time and she got like bad, um, reactions from her neighbors...And they came to her house and told her, "We don't do this here." And she said that she didn't care. And she just, I don't know, she just realized, she was like, "I just told them that I don't see race as a problem. I feel like people are people." And I liked that she had said that.

Camden encourages teachers to make their best effort to understand, and if they cannot fully understand, then that is alright, “Just be who you are. And leave it at that. And, um, just try to understand. And if you can't, then that's okay.”

Summary

This chapter shared the findings from the analysis of data based on focus group meetings with African American high school students. Focus group meetings were guided by a set of interview questions that were organized into five distinct sections, which upon analysis presented themselves as the natural themes of the data: mentorship, views of school, school experiences, student-teacher relationships, and race and relationships. The theme of mentorship included the subthemes of mentors and qualities of mentors. Views of school considered participants' thoughts on school in general as well as their specific schools. School experiences was the major theme while elementary memories, middle school/junior high/high school memories, negative memories, and memories involving a teacher in school were the subthemes. The subthemes of teacher qualities and teacher actions made up the theme of student-teacher relationships. Race and student-teacher relationships focused on participant perceptions of race in general, participant perceptions of race in school, racial issues, teacher qualities related to race, and teacher actions related to race.

Chapter V: Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships. The positive connections between student achievement, student engagement, and student-teacher relationships have been established in previous research (Willms, 2003; Roorda et al., 2011). Strong student-teacher relationships appear to increase student engagement and achievement, which highlights the need for a more complete understanding of those dynamics that lead to student success. National academic and behavioral data indicating that African American students score lower on standardized measures of academic achievement and receive higher numbers of discipline referrals than White students points to the need for further examination of how race and student-teacher relationships may intersect. However, limited research exists on student-teacher relationships from the student perspective (Kahn et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2016), so this study focused on the thoughts and experiences of African American high school students in Arkansas. In an effort to better understand the student perspective on student-teacher relationships, this study was guided by the following research question:

> What are the perceptions of African American high school students regarding the development of student-teacher relationships?

This chapter provides a summary of findings followed by a more extensive discussion of the key findings. A section for implications for practice will consider how the results of this study may contribute knowledge or strategies to educators or organizations that may be used in order to improve the development of student-teacher relationships with African American students. Another section focused on implications

for further research will share relevant information to improve or extend this study. Finally, a summary section will conclude the information presented in this chapter.

Summary of Findings

Data for this study was collected from two focus group meetings held virtually with 10 students from two different public high schools. A set of interview questions guided the focus group meetings, and the five distinct sections of the interview questions transferred naturally to the five themes of the study: mentorship, views of school, school experiences, student-teacher relationships, and race and relationships.

The theme of mentorship was divided into the subthemes of mentors, which was who participants identified as their mentors, and qualities of mentors, which included what students felt made a good mentoring relationship. Participants primarily identified family members, and specifically females, as their mentors. The qualities of mentors highlighted in the data include the mentor's willingness to listen and try to understand, support in helping the participant make good decisions, and demonstrating strong leadership and character.

Participant views of school considered participants' thoughts on school in general as well as their perception of their own schools. With the exception of one participant, participants typically had a negative view of school in general, using words such as "work" and "stress" repeatedly. Participant views of their own schools were more varied, though. While participants saw areas for improvement, they were intentional to include disclaimers of their positive feelings towards their school before making any potentially critical remarks. School pride was a point of emphasis in discussing specific schools.

School experiences was the larger theme with sub-themes of elementary

memories, middle school/junior high/high school memories, negative memories, and memories involving a teacher in school. Special events and free time were the major findings when participants recalled elementary school. In discussing middle school, junior high, or high school memories, participants tended to focus on middle school and junior high. As with elementary school, participants focused on special events and the perceived relaxed nature of that level of school. Negative memories were varied and included a range of memories from previous schools. Similarly, participant memories involving a teacher were diverse, ranging from classroom experiences to extracurricular activities.

The theme of student-teacher relationships was broken down to focus on teacher qualities and teacher actions, and teacher actions were further divided to report individual actions separately from collective actions. Six teacher qualities presented themselves as important to participants: care, laid-back personality, personal connections, knowing students, understanding, and not mad all the time. Individual actions that participants found helpful were intentionally checking in with students, sharing with students, and going beyond the basic responsibilities of teaching to support students. Six teacher collective actions presented themselves as important to students: letting students get to know them, being understanding and not bashing students for mistakes, not overloading students with work, doing fun or light-hearted things in class, making efforts to understand and help students, and treating everyone equally.

Race and student-teacher relationships focused on participant perceptions of race in general, participant perceptions of race in school, racial issues, teacher qualities related to race, and teacher actions related to race. In talking about race in general, participants

shared the pressure they feel to succeed because they must prove themselves as African American men and women and discussed their experiences with racism, discrimination, and stereotyping. More specifically, in school, participants highlighted how they must code-switch to fit in, how White students inappropriately try to fit in, and how they felt about school attempts to address race. Teacher qualities related to race seemed to be harder for participants to identify besides the teacher qualities already discussed when talking about student-teacher relationships in general, although participants were clear that they felt an African American teacher is more relatable to them than a White teacher. Teacher actions related to race that participants felt were important included treating all students equally and becoming educated on issues relevant to students.

Discussion

As the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American students on the development of student-teacher relationships, the findings of this study are focused on the student perspective of relationship building. This is an important consideration since research centered on the student perspective of relationships is limited and the conclusions developed from student input may inform the ways in which educators approach relationship building with students (Kahn et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2016). Four key findings can be derived from this study. First, data from this study suggest that student-teacher relationships are often built through small, meaningful experiences. Secondly, teachers who are intentional in trying to understand students, both personally and culturally, appear to build better relationships with students. Another key finding supports the historical and contemporary research that students report racism,

discrimination, and stereotyping are common experiences. Finally, the results of this study seem to affirm this study's theoretical framework, self-determination theory.

Relationships are Often Built Through Everyday, Meaningful Experiences

In talking about memories of different levels of school, qualities of favorite teachers, and how teachers can reach across potential cultural barriers to build strong student-teacher relationships, participants regularly returned to "the small details of everyday interactions" (Krane et al., 2016, p.31641). These small, meaningful experiences participants felt were important included such actions as checking on a student when something appeared wrong, sharing a snack with a student, reaching out to a parent to encourage a student, and several other seemingly minor events that take place in the course of a teacher's day. The inclusion of these experiences as a central part of participants' responses confirm prior research on the importance of regular interactions between students and teachers to the development of supportive student-teacher relationships (Krane et al., 2016).

Participants shared numerous examples of meaningful experiences that stood out to them as actions or events that led to stronger student-teacher relationships. Teachers who allowed students to get to know them and took the time to share pieces of their life with students was meaningful to participants. For example, Jonesboro recalled her English teacher telling the class about an experience she had involving race when she moved to the community. Additionally, some participants remembered their favorite classes with their favorite teachers as those where the teacher occasionally did things like letting students work outside for a period, playing music in class, or making the assignment a fun competition. Participants also felt more positively about teachers who

were willing to work with them if they were struggling to complete an assignment. Stuttgart felt that teachers who did not "bash you and go crazy" when homework was forgotten but instead allowed students to turn it in had better relationships with students. Bryant spoke about a teacher who would make herself available outside of the regular class period to help students complete assignments that may require extra time in an effort to get students the best grade possible.

While there are many instances of teachers taking actions and facilitating experiences that were unique to individual participants in this study, a bulk of the responses from participants regarding teacher actions or qualities were more collective in the sense that the experience with the teacher was benefiting multiple students or the whole class instead of an individual student. Phillippo's (2012) research indicates that students make determinations on their relationship with particular teachers based on a teacher's interactions with other students, even if those interactions are not directly with the student, which this study's findings appear to support. Both positively and negatively, participants recalled instances where a teacher interacted with another student, and that interaction impacted the participants' feelings about the teacher. For instance, participants at one school recalled a teacher addressing an opposing student section for making racist remarks. On the other hand, Lonoke talked about a teacher who African American students perceived as always having "a situation with her and a Black student." Participants provided a wealth of data on teachers' collective actions as well that were directed at a whole class or group of students yet influenced their individual feelings about a teacher.

My Teacher "Did Her Best to Understand"

A common theme in participant responses regarding student-teacher relationships centered on the multifaceted concept of understanding. Participants highlighted two distinct forms of understanding: individually and culturally. In its individual form, understanding presents itself as a teacher's knowledge of and relationship with individual students. For this study, cultural understanding is being aware and educated on topics relevant to African American students. These findings based on participant responses in this study support Dods' (2013) research that resulted in a four element model for supportive relationships, which includes relationships that are individualized and highlight active interaction with teachers who are in tune with their students. The component of the model that focuses on individualized relationships fits with the individual concept of teacher understanding, while the emphasis of the other component on teachers who are in tune with their students points to the cultural concept of teacher understanding.

The importance of teachers exhibiting an individual understanding of each student was repeated in various ways throughout each focus group meeting. In one example of a teacher demonstrating her knowledge and understanding of students, Texarkana described a teacher who would reach out when she could tell one of her students was having a challenging day or was not acting like themselves. Individual understanding goes beyond the classroom, though, as Bryant recalled a teacher understanding his transportation situation and providing him with a ride to school for a period of time. More generally, speaking about one of her favorite teachers, Malvern felt that "he loves all of us and he knows all our different personalities." Participants in this study clearly express

their preference for teachers who understand them as individuals and develop individualized relationships with each student.

While the student population across America has continued to become more diverse, the teacher workforce has remained consistently White, with approximately 82% of teachers identifying as White (NCES, 2013). Participants in this study affirmed previous findings that African American teachers are perceived as more understanding of African American students because they possess a deeper cultural knowledge and understanding (Roberts, 2010). Lonoke explained her feeling of comfort with African American teachers simply, stating “Because they understand.” Lonoke’s sentiment was shared by other participants, particularly in regards to the ways African American students must code-switch to fit in with expectations for communication, dress, and behavior, among other things, with White teachers in predominantly White schools. The reality in schools, especially in Arkansas, is that most teachers are White. However, since this has been the experience of all participants in this study, participants shared multiple examples of how White teachers have strengthened relationships through cultural understanding. Stuttgart was appreciative of a teacher who was “educated on issues that are going on in the world” and shared information to help her with an essay on the mortality rate of African Americans. Similarly, Malvern was impressed with a teacher who had “taken the time out to actually research and learn about, you know, African American, you know, things and stuff like that.” Participants acknowledged that cultural understanding may present some challenges for White teachers, but the teacher’s effort to understand was key to the development of the student-teacher relationship. Camden

communicates this idea clearly when she spoke about a teacher who attempted to better understand her students, saying "She did her best to understand."

Racism, Discrimination, and Stereotyping Remain Common Experiences

Discussions in the focus group meetings ranged from participants' experiences in the community to interpersonal interactions within the school, and participants were consistent in their responses on the common experience of racism, discrimination, and stereotyping in various forms. This finding supports prior research that reports African American youth at a national level are the victims of racial discrimination from an early age (Seaton & Douglas, 2014). In an effort to contextualize the development of student-teacher relationships, this study included specific questions about community dynamics, participant views of school, and the impact of race on relationships, so participants had the opportunity to address race in multiple settings. In the community setting, school setting, and within individual relationships, participants expressed their perceptions of experiencing racism, discrimination, or stereotyping.

While the focus of this study was on the development of student-teacher relationships, participants also had a chance to share their thoughts on race in general. Participants felt pressure to succeed in life because they have "something to prove," as Junction City stated, to the world as African American men and women. Some participants in this study expressed their feelings that society sets expectations that "Black people can't be successful" because they are "just gonna end up dead or in jail," "selling dope in the streets," or "pregnant with a lot of children."

In recalling memories of school and interactions in school, participants highlighted multiple examples of racism, discrimination, or stereotyping. One theme that

became apparent throughout the process of data analysis was that participants in this study felt they must alter their behavior, words, or way of being in some way to fit in with the dominant White culture. Lonoke and Texarkana likened this to being required to have two faces in order to avoid being judged. These changes made to fit in included dressing differently, talking differently, and acting differently, among other things. The potentially uncomfortable dynamics between White and Black students was another theme that appeared in this study. Bryant acknowledged the tension that can result at times between White and Black students as White students "feel like they gotta prove that they are not racist." This may lead to awkward feelings in class when topics of race are discussed or confusion when White students make certain statements in an effort to fit in with Black students, as explained by Bryant and Junction City.

According to participants in this study, teachers have an important role in determining how race influences the school environment and relationships between students and teachers. Some participants highlighted the positive impact teachers had on them and the school regarding race, but it was not uncommon for participants to share examples of the negative impact teachers had regarding race either. Texarkana told about a teacher directing a question about watermelon to her in class based on the stereotype that African Americans like watermelon. In another instance, Bryant remembered a teacher making assumptions about the homes of African American students and making a comment about getting beat with an extension cord. Lonoke was wearing her afro out in eighth grade, and a teacher asked her if it was a wig, which the participant interpreted as assuming that African American women cannot have a lot of hair. Each of these examples go along with Sue et al.'s (2007) concept of microaggressions that

"communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights or insults" (p.273). Further, though, Goings and Bianco (2016) found that African American high school males in their study shaped their views on teachers based on their experiences with racial microaggressions. Another element of Goings and Bianco's 2016 study were the low expectations of teachers for African American students, and Texarkana speaks directly to this notion in this study when she says teachers "kinda set their standards lower for, like, people of color." Participants in this study communicated their sense that African American students were viewed and treated differently when they made equality a point of emphasis in discussing how White teachers should treat African American students "100% equal" and not show favoritism to White students.

Connections with Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory is a universal framework made up of six mini-theories that can be used to examine the psychology of motivation, engagement, and relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Humans' basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are at the core of self-determination theory, and as such, these three concepts can appropriately be applied in considering student-teacher relationships (Deci et al., 1991). The perceptions of participants in this study regarding the development of student-teacher relationships appear to reflect the importance of competence, autonomy, and relatedness as proposed by self-determination theory.

According to self-determination theory, competence centers on an individual's knowledge and ability to achieve particular outcomes (Deci et al., 1991). Competence as it applies to student-teacher relationships can present in many ways, but participants in this study highlight how teachers built positive relationships by supporting students in

reaching competency, whether academically or socially. For example, multiple participants remembered a teacher helping them master an academic concept or complete a specific assignment, and this was even more powerful when the assistance was provided in addition to what was required based on the teacher's responsibility in helping students with his or her classwork. In helping students achieve social competency, teachers discussed in this study performed several actions from the elementary level to the high school level, but a specific example could be a teacher who reaches out to students when they are not acting like they normally do or not engaging in class as expected and supports them in identifying or solving problems they are facing.

Autonomy refers to an individual's ability to self-initiate and self-regulate one's thoughts and actions (Deci et al., 1991). Despite participants in this study not using this particular terminology, responses in each focus group meeting indicate the importance of participants being able to make decisions for themselves without the interference of others. This can be seen in the way participants shared their comfortability with an African American teacher or in a predominantly African American environment because they could act in more familiar ways. Participants expressed the ways in which they were required to alter their behavior to fit in predominantly White settings. The need to adjust thoughts or actions based on external factors related to race would seem to take away from the autonomy of participants in this study.

Relatedness includes the ability to develop positive connections with others, and participant responses in this study appear to emphasize this component of student-teacher relationships (Deci et al., 1991). A key finding of this study was the importance of teachers' individual and cultural understanding of students in order to develop stronger

relationships, which goes along with the concept of relatedness. When participants felt that teachers knew them on an individual, personal level, they were more inclined to view that relationship favorably. Likewise, when participants perceived a teacher as understanding their culture and background, they had more positive feelings about that relationship. Student-teacher relationships appeared to improve when participants felt more related to a teacher based on his or her understanding of the participant as an individual and as a member of a specific group.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

This study carries implications for a range of educational shareholders, including teachers, school leaders, and educator preparation programs, among others. As the connections between academic achievement, student engagement, and student-teacher relationships become apparent throughout research in each domain, an exploration of student-teacher relationships may lead to improvement in the areas of achievement, engagement, and relationships (Willms, 2003; Roorda et al., 2011). This study has the potential to contribute to a more complete understanding of how relationships between African American students and majority White teachers can best be developed.

Implications for Practice

The conclusions of this study are especially relevant to three major shareholder groups: teachers, school leaders, and educator preparation programs. The perceptions of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships can inform the practices of teachers in establishing relationships with students, the practices of school leaders in facilitating meaningful relationships between

students and teachers, and the practices of educator preparation programs in preparing pre-service teachers to build positive relationships with students.

Implications for Teachers. The student perspective is at the center of this study, and the experiences and thoughts of the participants of this study shed light on how the actions and characteristics of teachers are perceived by this particular group of high school students. There are a multitude of factors that lead to the unique relationship between each student and teacher; however, this study highlights some of the factors that students find most meaningful, and consequently, appear to be most impactful to enhanced student-teacher relationships. Two key findings of this study may serve as the most beneficial pieces of information for teachers to apply to their relationship building efforts: relationships are built through everyday, meaningful experiences and teacher efforts at understanding students, both individually and culturally, are recognized and appreciated by students.

Participants in this study highlighted numerous instances of teachers engaging in small acts that made an impact on relationships with students. These experiences included checking in with students who appeared to be having a bad day, helping students with an assignment for another class, and sharing snacks with students. Meaningful experiences were not limited to actions directed at a particular student, though. Participants recalled days where teachers played music, let students work outside, or made the lesson a fun competition. It is clear that the participants in this study were influenced by the everyday, meaningful experiences teachers were intentional in creating.

Teacher understanding of students, individually and culturally, was another essential finding of this study. Participants described their favorite teachers, and in most

cases, that description included an element of the teacher knowing his or her students and all of their unique personalities. The other side of teacher understanding is the cultural dimension, where teachers demonstrate they have some knowledge of students outside of school in the context of their culture. For example, multiple participants indicated their appreciation for teachers who had made the effort to learn about issues relevant to African American students, such as social initiatives and racial dynamics in society. Teachers who understood their students as individuals and as members of a cultural group were identified by participants as the teachers who had better relationships with students.

Implications for School Leaders. To the extent that school leaders are responsible for the culture of their school and the environment in which relationships are developed, this study can serve as a tool for focusing efforts of school leaders on fostering strong relationships between teachers and African American students. To be clear, teachers are the key agent in developing relationships with students, as apparent in the participant responses on student-teacher relationships, but school leaders may use the findings of this study to inform building-level or district-level practices that facilitate relationship building between students and teachers.

As this study finds value in the everyday, meaningful experiences created by teachers and the multifaceted understanding of students by teachers, school leaders have an opportunity to explore the specific elements of each of these findings and identify how teachers in a given building or district can make intentional efforts to build stronger relationships with students. This likely includes targeted professional development for teachers on how to most meaningfully engage with students in their daily interactions and

how to approach understanding students as individuals and as members of a cultural group. Of course, school leaders should also model best practices in relationship building with students in order to demonstrate the priorities of student-teacher relationship development.

The finding on the common experience of racism, discrimination, and stereotyping for the participants of this study is of particular concern for school leaders as they seek to build and maintain a learning environment where all students feel safe, welcome, and supported. Participants from one high school pointed to their principal as someone who "does not play about that race game," which should be the goal for all school leaders to be perceived by students as someone who does not accept racism, discrimination, or stereotyping as the norm for their school. Students expressed appreciation and respect for teachers and leaders when racial issues were addressed appropriately, but they also recognized when situations involving racism were ignored or handled lightly, which negatively influenced their feelings about school and the adults in it. School leaders should take steps to educate students, teachers, and families on issues related to race through appropriate resources based on the needs of the school and community, and when racial situations arise that warrant the intervention of school leaders, there must be no misunderstanding about the position of the school and its leadership on the equality and fair treatment of all students.

Implications for Educator Preparation Programs. Since little research has been conducted to include the student perspective on the development of student-teacher relationships, it follows that educator preparation programs are limited in their ability to fully prepare pre-service teachers with a foundation in research-based and evidence-based

practices for relationship development (Kahn et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2016). This study provides a set of findings based on student perceptions of the development of student-teacher relationships that may inform the ways in which pre-service teachers are educated and prepared to build relationships with African American students. The findings of this study present four specific areas that educator preparation programs can incorporate to potentially improve student-teacher relationships.

First, pre-service teachers can be taught the importance of everyday, meaningful experiences that appear to enhance relationships between teachers and students. Educator preparation programs can make clear that strong student-teacher relationships are not built through random, major actions; rather, solid relationships are developed over time through the everyday interactions that become meaningful with consistency. Secondly, educator preparation programs can communicate the need for teachers to understand their students individually and culturally. More specifically, pre-service teachers can be given strategies to improve their efforts in this regard. Next, educator preparation programs should acknowledge and address the common experiences African American students have with racism, discrimination, and stereotyping. This is most likely done through improved efforts at the program level to include meaningful training on diversity, inclusive practices, and cultural responsiveness. Finally, educator preparation programs could benefit from incorporating elements of self-determination theory to enhance pre-service teacher understanding of the psychology of motivation, engagement, and relationships.

Implications for Future Research

This study considered the perceptions of African American high school students in two Arkansas public high schools on the development of student-teacher relationships. The dynamics of this study and its resulting findings provide a variety of implications for future research. The primary implications for future research exist within the domains of research design and scope of study.

Implications for Future Research Design. The findings of this study were based on the data collected from two virtual focus group meetings comprised of ten African American high school students from two public high schools in Arkansas. The breadth and depth of data was limited by the smaller number of focus group meetings and the virtual format required by Covid-19 restrictions. Future studies could benefit from an expanded sample size to include a more representative sample of Arkansas public high school students. While the findings of this study appear consistent across both focus groups, future studies could include a larger number of focus groups in order to provide additional layers of triangulation. Focus group meetings were selected as the method of data collection to encourage honest conversation in a safe environment, but incorporating follow-up interviews to extend on focus group discussions with particular students would allow for a more detailed understanding of individual students' perceptions on the specific topics included in this study (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Implications for Future Scope of Study. The dynamics of student-teacher relationships are complex and vary across contexts, so a single study could not fully address the entire scope of student-teacher relationships, student perceptions of

relationships, and racial impact on relationships. Future studies could gain a richer understanding of these elements with a broader and deeper scope.

Participants from each respective high school were chosen randomly in an effort to ensure adequate representation of the African American student population; however, the participants in this study are limited to share only their experiences at their particular schools, so the scope of future studies should be intentional to broaden the participant sample size to more high schools in different areas of the state. Along those lines, this study could be replicated in other states to identify patterns and trends in student-teacher relationship development across geographic locations. Further along, studies might include different demographic groups in order to gain a more holistic understanding of student-teacher relationships from the perspective of diverse students beyond the African American students in this particular study.

Student perspectives on student-teacher relationships were central to this study; however, future research might also benefit from adding the teacher perspective to the study in order to provide a more complete understanding of relationships between students and teachers. Analyzing data collected from a group of students from a particular high school alongside data collected from a group of teachers from the same high school would enrich the understanding of those relationships and present multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon. Student and teacher perspectives within the same study would allow for stronger triangulation of data.

This study included the components of participant views on school, perceptions of student-teacher relationships, and thoughts on the impact of race in school and on relationships. Each of these components are worthy of more attention and further study,

so future research should focus more specifically on the individual components of this study and explore the impact each component has on student-teacher relationships. The interview questions utilized in this study allowed for an overview of multiple topics, but future studies might benefit from adjusting the scope and sequence of questions to prompt more specific feedback from participants.

Summary

This study explored the perceptions of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships based on a single research question that encompassed a range of specific topics. The following research question guided the study:

> What are the perceptions of African American high school students regarding the development of student-teacher relationships?

Ten participants from two public high schools in Arkansas engaged in two focus group meetings conducted virtually to provide data for this study. After an iterative process of transcribing, coding, and identifying patterns in the data using the constant comparative method, themes were developed and findings were produced (Glaser, 1965). Four key findings resulted from this study: student-teacher relationships are often built through everyday, meaningful experiences; student-teacher relationships are improved when teachers understand students individually and culturally; racism, discrimination, and stereotyping are common experiences for the participants in this study; and self-determination theory is a helpful framework for understanding the psychology of student-teacher relationships.

This chapter provided a summary of findings, which was preceded by an introduction to the chapter. A discussion of the four major findings of the study followed. The discussion of each finding was supported by an explanation of the finding and reference to data that resulted in the finding. Implications for the practices of teachers, school leaders, and educator preparation programs followed the discussion of key findings. This study may be used to inform the relationship-building practices of teachers as they seek to create meaningful experiences and understand their students, the leadership and facilitation of positive student-teacher relationships by school leaders, and the training of pre-service teachers for building strong student-teacher relationships by educator preparation programs. Finally, implications for future research were included in this chapter to guide further exploration of this important topic.

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Appendix A

IRB Letter of Approval

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND SPONSORED PROGRAMS

1509 North Boulder Avenue
Administration, Room 207
Russellville, AR 72801

479-880-4327
www.atu.edu

October 28, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

The Arkansas Tech University Institutional Review Board has approved the IRB application for Michael Hensley's proposed research, entitled "Understanding the perceptions of African American high school students on the development of student-teacher relationships." Please proceed with your research.

We wish you success with this endeavor.

Sincerely,

Melissa Darnell

Melissa Darnell, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Member
Arkansas Tech University