RELEVANCE AND CARE IN TEACHER PRACTICES: SUPPORTING AFRICAN
AMERICAN STUDENTS AS LEARNERS

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APPROVAL OF THE CAPSTONE PROJECT

This capstone project, "Relevance and Care in Teacher Practices: Supporting African American Students as Learners," has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the Curry School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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_____07/29/2016_____
Date

DEDICATION

To Abba. Hosanna!

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INTRODUCTION

In August of 2013, the U.S. Census commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech by publishing statistics of economic and educational changes among African Americans. While 25.7 percent of African Americans had completed at least four years of high school by age 25 in 1964, the number increased to 85.0 percent by 2012. Census data also reflects positive changes in the percentage of African Americans participating in post-secondary education. Although statistics generated for one year after the historic speech and March suggested that 3.9% had completed four years of college, in 2012, 21.2 percent of African Americans reached this educational milestone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). While these percentages suggest promising strides in educational attainment, statistics also suggest that there is still much room for growth. While improved from fifty years before, the percentage of high school completion for African Americans is 1.4 percent less than the total population average. A greater racial discrepancy exists in figures for completion of four years or more of college, as the percentage of African American students (22.5 %) is 10 points below the percentage for the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). College Board (2014) data also suggests that, while African Americans made up approximately 14.5% of the nation's class of 2013, they represented only 9.2% of AP exam participants and 4.6% of students earning a 3 or higher.

Discussions regarding the type of education to which African American students should have access has spanned more than a century (Banks, 2006; Darling-Hammond, Williamson & Hyler, 2007; Delpit, 2006; DuBois, 1903; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lee, 2009; Walker, 1996;

Woodson, 2008). Post-slavery considerations in the creation of schools for Black students, early twentieth century debates regarding the benefits of liberal arts versus technical studies, movements towards integrated and equitable schooling surrounding the 1954 Brown versus Board of Education decision, southern massive resistance efforts to preserve racial separation, modern controversies regarding disproportionate racial trends in school tracking and the creation of African-centered and community-based schools together provide snapshots of the multi-layered history of education for African Americans within the United States over the last century. Yet, formal schooling serves only as a microcosm of ever-evolving social, economic and political dynamics with respect to race and ideologies regarding the nature of intelligence that have worked to influence perceptions of if and how to best serve and honor the humanity of African Americans as capable and talented individuals and communities.

While a comprehensive discussion of the nature and prevalence of racial biases and approaches to changing them are beyond the scope of this project, suffice it to say that many students that identify as Black or African American will potentially face considerable challenges as they negotiate their identities, roles and relationships within this national context haunted by a history of oppression and brimming with inequitably accessible opportunities. The United States is a context in which various peoples have considered the feasibility and worthwhileness of striving towards an "American Dream" and the sense of hope and accomplishment that the concept suggests. Troubled by a history of minimizing the capacity of African Americans and riddled by the effects of longstanding biases, stereotypes, fears and social tensions, the importance of exploring how to create learning environments in which students experience relevant curriculum and instruction and genuine support and encouragement to invest as learners is of critical importance. By examining African American students' participation in classroom

and extracurricular activities, Nasir (2005) and others (Nasir & Cooks, 2009; Nasir & Hand, 2008) have provided glimpses into ways in which students position themselves as learners. Supporting students in seeing themselves as learners is important because it is one of several factors that influences the extent to which they engage in classroom lessons and interactions (Nasir, Snyder, Shah & Ross, 2012). Furthermore, student engagement, along with understanding, plays a crucial role in the extent to which students retain the information they encounter (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). Additionally, studies suggests that there is a link between the way that a student sees him or herself in a given context and how he or she processes content, develops skills and builds relationships within the classroom (Nasir & Hand, 2008; Oyserman & Terry, 2006; Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012). Stereotype threat describes the detrimental effects that a negative perception of how he or she is viewed by others can potentially have on a student of color's psyche. The theory suggests that a student's knowledge of positive or negative stereotypes about a group with which he or she identifies can influence success in the stereotype-specific domain, especially when cognizance of group membership is triggered. In other words, one's identification with a particular group and perception of how members are regarded by others may cause a fear of fulfilling the negative stereotype and, consequently, negatively influence performance and achievement (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Studies also suggest that the emotional processing evoked by stereotype threat may hinder learning and productivity by occupying valuable cognitive processing resources and/or provoking anxiety and avoidant behavior (Mangels, Good, Whiteman, Maniscalco and Dweck, 2012).

In addition to potentially influencing student performance and mental productivity, the way teachers see students within their classrooms and the relationships they have with them can also affect the resources available to students as they continue to carve out a sense of self (Nasir

& Cooks, 2009). Case study data of secondary schools with high percentages of college-attending graduates (Lewis-Charp & Law, 2014), insights from students reporting satisfaction and engagement with their schooling experiences (Antrop-González & DeJesús, 2006; Lewis-Charp & Law, 2014) and studies conducted in out of school contexts provide additional evidence that African American students willingly assume apprentice, or learner, roles in settings in which it feels accessible and worthwhile to do so (Nasir & Cooks, 2009; Nasir & Hand, 2008). Within and outside of the classroom, relevant experiences assist students in assuming identities and behaviors that are congruent with learning content, skills and essential understandings of a discipline. Additionally, meaningful and useful curriculum and instruction within an environment where students feel cared for provide greater opportunities for student capacity recognition and development. This capstone project had two primary objectives: 1) to explore how relevance and care were enacted by teachers at Joseph N. Weaver High School (JWHS), and 2) to create a resource that could assist the JWHS administration with supporting its faculty's use of curriculum and instruction as vehicles for meaningfulness, usefulness and care for African American students. In the paragraphs that follow, I will first share more specific details about the local context within which this study took place. I will then go into greater detail regarding connections between racial and academic identity development and school experiences for African American adolescents, followed by additional contextual factors that may influence students' engagement as learners. Finally, I will follow up with a deeper exploration into characteristics of curricular and instructional relevance and affective dynamics that may function to support students in assuming roles as *learners* and *doers* within the classroom, thereby also serving as catalysts for recognizing and developing student capacity.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Joseph N. Weaver High School (Weaver High School, JWHS) is part of a district that has local standards aimed at promoting mastery of skills useful for learning across the lifespan. The goals are numerous and include guiding students in learning how to conduct research, think critically and analytically, apply reasoning skills, understand patterns and solve increasingly complex problems, among others (Retrieved from school district website). Recently, the district also adopted strategies for promoting learning across a lifespan through seven areas of focus, all of which relate to enabling students to be producers, rather than just consumers, and to actualize their potential as innovators and agents of change (Retrieved from district blog entry). The school's principal is a native of the area and earned degrees through the doctoral level, matriculating at both historically Black and flagship universities. He uses technology and social media to connect with students, teachers and community members. In addition to sharing periodic highlights about school achievements on a blog site, he also posts and responds to messages on a professional Twitter account and makes weekly appearances on the school's daily, student-run news show (Retrieved from school website). Weaver High School also has its own gifted resource teacher who provides counseling services to students and teachers regarding year-round enrichment opportunities, college counseling, affective support, and advice regarding course selection and differentiated instruction within the classroom. The teacher also posts summer opportunities on a website publicly accessible through the school's gifted resource page (Retrieved from school website). Additionally, JWHS houses a medicine and science specialty program that serves students from throughout the district.

Weaver High School recently began a program through which all of its students would eventually be provided access to a laptop to use in class and at home. Approaching the

conclusion of its second year of implementation, the school provided the technology to both

ninth and tenth graders during the 2014-2015 school year. Each year, this initiative includes a

specific area of focus by which teachers are asked to make use of the increased student access to

technology within the classroom. Teachers at all grade levels and from all disciplines have been

encouraged to focus much energy on improving students' preparation in "writing for the 21st

century" (Conversation with school principal).

   During the 2014-2015 school year, Joseph N. Weaver High School (JWHS) offered

approximately twenty advanced placement courses and several honors-level courses in STEM,

humanities and language, as well as dual-enrollment options in conjunction with the local

community college (Retrieved from school website). Approximately 42% of Weaver High

School's students were enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, according to data for the 2013-

2014 academic year (Retrieved from state department of education report card). While data for

the two most recent school years was not yet available, archival data suggested that

approximately 31% of students took Advanced Placement tests in 2012 and 2013 (Retrieved

from state department of education report card). Additionally, just under 14 percent of students

took dual enrollment courses during the 2013-2014 school year. Of Weaver High School's 1,100

students, just under 30% were Black or Hispanic and just under 70% were White. While a

marginally higher percentage of Black students graduated within four years than the school's

average for all students (approximately 95%), only 50% of Black students graduated with

advanced diplomas, 12% less than the school's average for all students within the same cohort

(Retrieved from state department of education report card).

   A primary focus of capstone work is to address the needs and goals of the site at which

the project is conducted (Curry School of Education, 2011). In addition to the previously

mentioned values espoused by the school district, preliminary conversations with the principal suggested that Weaver High School would provide a rich context for considering and making recommendations regarding the application of research and theory-based scholarship to the everyday work of education practitioners. The principal of Weaver High School believed that the tendency of students and staff to embrace diversity was an important asset that characterized the school. Additionally, he described his staff as having an approach to "do whatever it takes" to help students succeed. The principal expressed a specific desire to better understand how to eliminate barriers and obstacles and create more opportunities and strategies to support students of color in pursuing and enjoying success in advanced level coursework. We agreed that observations, conversations with school personnel and the eventual production of a resource that focused on understanding and improving curricular and instructional relevance, while also considering teacher care and other facets of the overall classroom context, would be useful as the school continued to grow in meeting the needs of African American and other students within its diverse student body (Conversation with school principal).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Race, Academic and Disciplinary Identity Development: Intersecting Processes

Identity develops and evolves over the course of human development and is influenced by context (Phinney, 2008). While all life stages influence how it begins and continues to evolve, adolescence is a critical period for identity construction (Tatum, 1997). Erikson (1950) describes adolescence as a time when youth reevaluate and reconcile all that they have learned about themselves thus far with the physiological changes taking places within them and their interactions with the world around them. In considering racial or ethnic identity, some scholars have focused on developing measures to understand the extent to which young people identify themselves as belonging to particular ethnic groups and the personal experiences that may have influenced the association(s) (Phinney, 1992; Phinney, 2008). Others have sought to understand racial and ethnic identity in terms of the variability or invariability of its various facets, with particular focus on one's racial salience, centrality, ideology and both public and private regards (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin & Lewis, 2006; Shelton & Sellers, 2000). Works focused specifically on the development of students of color suggest that identity has stable and contextually variable components (Oyserman, 2009; Shelton & Sellers, 2000), is influenced by multiple layers of current and socio-historical contexts (Lee, 2013) and is linked to student engagement and learning processes (Nasir, 2002; Nasir, Snyder, Shah & Ross, 2012; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006).

In each of many settings, students engage in continual sense-making of the *stories* that they encounter about themselves and the subgroup(s) with which they identify (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). As many adolescents spend a significant amount of time in school, the interactions they

have with peers, school personnel and the classroom curriculum influence how they make sense

of who they are as well as their decisions regarding who they would like to become. The extent

to which and how these experiences influence adolescent behavior can depend on a number of

factors, including how the embedded stories align with the broader narrative of students'

expectations for themselves, the personal significance of the party(ies) relaying the messages

(Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Varelas, Martin & Kane, 2013) and the coping process(es) enacted in

response to the stress and support they encounter on a daily basis (Spencer, Dupree & Hartmann,

1997; Spencer & Tinsley, 2008). Describing the difference between who people consider

themselves to be and who they believe they will become, Varelas, Martin and Kane (2013) draw

an important distinction between *identities in narrative* and *identities in practice*. Whereas the

former is defined as the way people describe themselves and are described by others, the latter

refers to the *behaviors* that reflect "distinguishable perspectives, styles and orientations" (p 324).

Considering identity in both senses may be useful in capturing mismatches between the

roles, or *future identities* (Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman & Destin, 2010), that students express a

desire to eventually take on and current behaviors that may be incongruous to achieving such

goals. Researchers studying students' conceptions of future and academic possible selves

suggest that the gap between high student aspirations and poor present day academic choices

may in part be explained by a sense that the future is distant and far removed (Oyserman, Terry

and Bybee, 2002), a disconnect between the activities demanded from the classroom setting and

"important social identities" (Oyserman, 2013, p. 179; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006) and/or a

perception that difficulty signals unattainability (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Students' learning

experiences have the potential to bridge who they are with who they desire to be (Bingham &

Okagaki, 2012; Varelas, Martin & Kane, 2013) and to protect them from becoming who they

desire to avoid (Oyserman, 2010). Furthermore, content learning and African American student identity development are interconnected processes that both involve meaning-making (Varelas, Martin & Kane, 2013). Varelas, Martin and Kane (2013) suggest a useful framework for exploring the relationship between content learning and identity construction. With particular focus on three different facets of identity, they relate *academic identity* to participation in "academic tasks and classroom practices," *disciplinary identity* as a person's identification as a "doer of the discipline," and *racial identity* as a student's "emerging understandings of what it means to be Black" (p. 325). To most deliberately and responsibly facilitate student identity construction in relation to the concepts, skills and processes embedded within curriculum, teachers can pay attention to how the dynamics of the classroom promote student engagement, the ways in which students position themselves in relation to the curriculum and their peers and the extent to which curriculum and instruction support students in assuming roles as "doers" of the subject. In addition to responding to the evidence of identity construction available through students' classroom practices, it may also be essential to build in time for students to reflect upon the ways in which the various facets of their identities are evolving within the context of the specific discipline (Varelas, Kane & Martin, 2013).

The next section will offer more details regarding the relationship between identity construction and classroom participation and performance, including studies that have shown promise for understanding the types of curriculum and instructional supports that make it appealing and worthwhile for African American students to adopt roles as capable learners.

Identity Construction, Classroom Participation and Performance: Contexts and Conditions that Support and Threaten Positive Learner Identity Construction

Some scholars suggest that there is a relationship between students' behaviors, sense of identity and the ways in which students assess the opportunities available to them in different settings (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011; Spencer, Dupree & Hartmann, 1997). Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) write, "When students lose faith in their ability to learn, they often turn to counterproductive ways of coping, such as…withdrawing" (p. 22). While Aronson, Fried and Good (2002) link "disidentification" (p. 2) from achievement (after experiencing negative outcomes) to students' efforts to preserve self-esteem, Oyserman (2009) describes the motivation towards particular academic behaviors in terms of identity-congruence, suggesting that people are more likely to act in ways that are congruous with their sense of self. She writes, "Although often experienced as stable, identity is highly malleable and situation-sensitive so that which aspects come to mind is a dynamic product of that which is chronically accessible and that which is situationally cued" (p 250). Thus, the concept of identity congruency suggests that the choices that students make may be influenced by the extent to which one option or the other aligns with both the persistent information that they have continually stored about who they are as well as the more specific messages that have been prompted by their current context. The *identity-based motivation* perspective suggests that identities play an essential role in both preparation for action and making sense of the world. Oyserman (2009) elaborates, "…the cued identity carries with it a general readiness to act and make sense of the world in identity-congruent terms, including the norms, values, strategies and goals associated with that identity as well as the cognitive procedures relevant to it" (p. 253).

The *readiness to act* that Oyserman (2009) describes may or may not align with what is beneficial to the person. The process of engaging in identity-congruent activity can occur automatically, in spite of what actions, upon deeper consideration, would seem most rational and in alignment with one's life goals and desires. Nevertheless, Oyserman, Bybee and Terry (2006) propose

> … self-concept is not monolithic, that [possible selves] are differentially accessible, and that they are likely to influence behaviors only when linked to strategies, when experienced as compatible with social identity, and when difficulty working toward [possible selves] is viewed as normative (p. 200).

Among intervention studies, one conducted by Oyserman, Terry and Bybee (2002) contributes to an understanding of classroom lessons that may help students to link aspirations and desired future selves, or *possible identities* (Oyserman & Destin, 2010), to academic participation and performance (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Oyserman, Terry & Bybee, 2002). Through a number of exercises during an after-school intervention, instructors guided students towards normalizing the idea of experiencing challenges and setbacks, considering present-day strategies that would assist them in attaining future goals and conducting informational interviews with members of their community (Oyserman, Terry & Bybee, 2002). Results suggested that the intervention positively influenced students' perceptions of possible selves (including both academically-focused and feared off-track selves), and thereby improved academic initiative, standardized test scores, student affect and in-school behavior. The authors suggested that working within a contextually and socially relevant setting, engaging in activities that promoted connection and academic achievement as congruous to racial identity,

and helping adolescents to connect personally desirable future selves with present-day choices and strategies contributed to the success of the intervention.

Considering connections between identity congruency, possible selves (or identities) and academic choices and behaviors may provide interesting direction for future studies related to stereotype threat as a potentially crippling phenomenon. For students who identify as African American, situations that cue negative stereotypes about intelligence or academic performance, can trigger fears of fulfilling the negative perceptions and, consequently, affect performance (Steele, 1997), especially if the student cares about his or her performance in that particular academic domain (Steele, 1998). It is possible that the effects could be particularly harmful if students do not have access to alternative narratives about the cultural group(s) to which they belong (Oyserman, Terry & Bybee, 2002). Research linking stereotype threat with beliefs regarding the malleability of intelligence provide additional insight about ways to buffer the effects of harmful stereotypes. Results to a study by Aronson, Fried and Good (2002) suggest that giving African American college students opportunities to explain to younger students how intelligence grows can buffer the negative effects of postsecondary students' fears that their performance will prove the accuracy of negative stereotypes. Students who participated in the treatment group wrote "letters advocating the malleability of intelligence," and reported more enjoyment of "the educational process," even while also reporting experiences of stereotype threat (p 8). Yet, despite significantly positive results, Aronson, Fried and Good (2002), noted that African American students participating in their study still reported lower levels of engagement with and enjoyment of their school learning processes than their White peers.

What role can relevance play in influencing student engagement and identification with classroom learning processes? The next section will define relevance and highlight some of the

reasons that it is such an important consideration in working to transform the experiences of African American students in classrooms.

Learning and Relevance: What does it all mean and what difference does it make?

Nasir, Snyder, Shah and Ross (2012) draw a distinction between learning and academic achievement, suggesting that, while the two are related, the latter more so describes the attainment of "markers of success" (p 286). For the purposes of this project, *learning* will be defined as "the process by which learners take up new information, acquire and deepen conceptual understandings of subject matter, and come to understand the natural and social world in new ways" (Nasir, Snyder, Shah & Ross, p. 286). Thus, curriculum and instruction that encourage and support students in identifying and positioning themselves as "learners" within the classroom and beyond will be considered to be those that are likely to inspire and train them to seek "new information, acquire and deepen conceptual understandings of subject matter, and come to understand the natural and social world in new ways" (Nasir, Snyder, Shah & Ross, p. 286).

Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) describe links between learning, relevance, and the extent to which information acquires a lasting home in student memory.

> If new learning and understanding are to find a secure place to take hold in the brain's memory network, then they need to make sense, build on past experiences, establish connections, and take meaning from those connections that ultimately emerge. Much meaning comes from pattern making…If both sense *and* meaning are present, the likelihood of long-term storage is very high (pp 48-49).

If and how students make sense of classroom content and experiences, can largely influence the extent to which long-term storage of content and concepts occurs (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Sousa

& Tomlinson, 2011). Additionally, whether or not their classroom experiences are *relevant*, or meaningful, also plays a large role in whether or not intended new learning is retained (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011).

Over the last century, several scholars have suggested that the content of popular media and school curriculum and instruction have either inaccurately or inadequately connected to the cultural and personal backgrounds of African American students (Delpit, 2006; DuBois, 2003; Gay, 2010; Woodson, 2008). While Loewen (2010) has written extensively about historical inaccuracies taught to students, Gay (2010) and Cortes (2001) have responded to incorrect and/or incomplete portrayals of minority groups by expressing the importance of helping students to critically analyze stereotypical representations of men and women from different ethnic groups in textbooks and mass media. Some scholars have also suggested that students may learn lessons from the absence of topics and perspectives, or "null curriculum," just as they learn from what is included (Ford & Milner, 2005). What has *not* been included in classroom experiences can deliver powerful messages to students about what personal and communal roles they and the communities with which they identify have played and can play in contributing to innovation, the universe of knowledge and the good of society altogether. Woodson (2008) and Eisner (2002) advise that what is *not* taught can communicate a lack of importance and value in the omitted information. Patterns of instruction that "skip" narratives detailing the perspectives, experiences and contributions of subpopulations may result in students learning that such perspectives and contributions are insignificant, anomalies or nonexistent. Considering that sense and meaning-making are both connected to identity development (Nasir, 2011; Varelas, Martin & Kane, 2012), students' interactions with people and curriculum within the classroom are not so

much a matter of *whether or not* they learn, but *what* they learn about the discipline, themselves and their environment (Nasir & Cook, 2009; Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

While the relevance of curriculum and instruction can influence how students understand and retain the underlying messages and overarching concepts and principles within and across disciplines (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2010; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), it can also communicate critical messages regarding the worthwhileness of both participating in contextual practices (Nasir & Cooks, 2009) and pursuing areas of career and personal interest (Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). Oyserman (2013) suggests that when students experience challenges within the classroom that are accompanied by messages confirming the importance of a desired future identity, student motivation to engage in an associated task may increase. To the contrary, when difficulty is perceived to be an indication of the impossibility of achieving a future identity, it has the potential to decrease student motivation to persist in completing a challenging assignment (Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). Described as "interpretation of difficulty," in greater detail

> …identities are dynamically constructed and, while salient identities cue readiness to act and make meaning in identity congruent ways, what an identity means and therefore which strategies, scripts or norms are associated with it are also highly malleable. Situations which do not make school-focused identities accessible, imply that doing well in school is not a thing that people like oneself do, or make the future feel far or the path impossible to travel are likely to undermine effort and ultimately performance (Oyserman, 2013, p. 184).

Academic rigor is an important characteristic of quality curriculum (Darling-Hammond, Williamson & Hyler, 2007; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). When appropriately

matched to students' readiness levels and accompanied by responsive (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004) and growth-minded instruction (Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012), demanding curriculum can communicate respect and high expectations, while supporting an understanding of wrestling through a challenging idea or task as essential to growth (Oyserman, 2013). However, curriculum falls short of its potential to provide the types of learning experiences that are enjoyable and/or make the process of pursuing new skills, understandings and ambitious future identities worthwhile and accessible (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Oyserman, 2013) when it fails to connect with the strengths, cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, interests and personal goals of its students (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011; Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004). While this is an important consideration for the sake of all students, it is of particular significance for students whose cultural perspectives are traditionally most likely to be omitted. For African American students, persistently partial educational norms are deeply rooted and have been severely consequential (Darling-Hammond, Williamson & Hyler, 2007, DuBois, 2003; Woodson, 2008).

The acquisition of new content knowledge and identity development are separate, but interwoven processes (Varelas, Martin & Kane, 2012). In addition to influencing the likelihood of long term storage of important content, concepts and skills, the extent to which students can identify connections between curriculum and their personal lives, interests and goals can also have implications for both student engagement and their beliefs about what opportunities and future identities are personally and collectively achievable. Nasir (2002) observes that as students identify more closely with the content and practices of learning contexts, they may also "beg[i]n to construct more sophisticated (as the play context affords) practice-linked goals (increasingly aligned with those of experts)" (p. 240). Students' experiences with curriculum within different learning environments influence and are influenced by their cultural experiences

and racialized sense of identity (Gay, 2013; Martin, 2012; Nasir, 2012). Of students who have

been "historically portrayed as underachieving and underrepresented in mathematics and

science," Varelas, Martin and Kane (2012) suggest,

> With respect to knowledge construction…What is needed is explicit, continuous,
>
> systematic, and extensive building of connections among the various experiences and
>
> underlying concepts and processes. Similarly, with respect to identity development, using
>
> pedagogical and curricular approaches that value students' meaning making, funds of
>
> knowledge, experiences in the world, and cultural ways of being is not enough for them
>
> to develop positive identities in relation to a disciplinary domain...Such students need to
>
> be explicitly positioned by themselves and others as capable *doers* of science and
>
> mathematics and in ways that build strong connections between their racial and ethnic
>
> identities and their disciplinary identities (p. 325, emphasis added).

So, what types of curricular characteristics and instructional practices present opportunities for

African American students to position themselves as capable *learners* and *doers* of disciplines

within classrooms, thereby also providing rich opportunities for teachers to recognize and

cultivate student capacity? The sections that follow will provide some suggestions for how

connection-building, critical and reflective thinking, opportunities to make contributions and

experience of care can set the stage for students to assume such roles.

Building Connections through Facets of Diverse Cultures

> Describing cultural responsiveness within the classroom, Gay (2011) writes,
>
> …curriculum content should be chosen and delivered in ways that are meaningful to the
>
> students for whom it is intended. In some instances, this means validating their personal
>
> experiences and cultural heritages; in others, it means teaching content entirely new to

ethnically and culturally diverse students but in ways that make it easy for them to

comprehend (p. 128).

Though historians have suggested that education, for many African Americans, has been viewed

as a means to obtain social and economic liberties (DuBois, 2003; Walker, 1996; Woodson,

2008), scholars have also documented that traditional experiences of the classroom curriculum

and instruction have often minimized the contributions and omitted the perspectives of

communities of color (Delpit, 2006; DuBois, 2003; Gay, 2010; Woodson, 2008). Some scholars

have also suggested that such classrooms only serve as microcosms of the broader challenges of

many African Americans to define their identities and to prosper within larger societies, in spite

and as a result of a collective history interwoven with accomplishment and oppression (Freire,

2009; Ogbu, 2004; Woodson, 2008). While relevance of curriculum and instruction is important

for all students, the potential challenges that today's heterogeneous population of African

American students may face in navigating tempestuous desires to enjoy a sense of mainstream

acceptance, maintain community belongingness, and/or embrace distinctiveness and individual

preferences (DuBois, 2003; Lee, 2009) makes working at deeper meaningfulness and usefulness

all the more complicated and essential. In exploring the concept of relevance as a means to build

connections that promote student engagement, build useful skill sets and support identification

with the learning process, several suggestions arise from research and theoretical scholarship.

While the suggestions for strengthening connections below are not intended to be

comprehensive, they are meant to offer thought-provoking strategies for making diverse cultural

backgrounds, including those of African American students, a more central consideration in

classroom curricula. The last topic in this section relates more broadly to exploring students'

individual interests.

Infusion of Diverse Perspectives, Experiences and Contributions

Tatum's (1997) survey of undergraduates revealed that many African American students regretted not having had access to classes focusing specifically on African American history in secondary school. She also proposes that, for some students, the implementation of culturally relevant curriculum could have somehow made a difference in their pursuit of postsecondary education. Relevant curriculum and instruction is infused with multicultural perspectives and include opportunities for students to learn about the challenges, successes and contributions of people from traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds, especially, though not exclusively, the ones with which they most identify.

In order to guide students through exploring important information about diverse populations, teachers must have a background understanding of diverse cultures and a willingness to continually learn more. Likewise, to recognize and appreciate the strengths and potential contributions that students' bring to the classroom, teachers must have background knowledge regarding students' specific cultures and heritages (Delpit, 2006). This suggests a need for intentional, informal and/or formal teacher research regarding the histories of diverse populations, specifically for the purposes of making important connections to required content and skills, enriching teachers' abilities to identify students' strengths and potentially challenging personal biases. Milner and Ford (2005) urge teachers to be self-reflective regarding their racial ideas and teaching practices.

> Teaching is a personal, social, and cultural enterprise. Who we are, our multiple and varied identities, influences what we teach (the curriculum content), why we teach it (our values, motives, beliefs), and how we teach (our instructional strategies and pedagogies) (p. 36).

While, the principle of infusing curriculum with multicultural perspectives has relevance

for all subject areas (Banks, 2006), perhaps its most obvious applications to content may be

found in the social sciences. Loewen (2010) notes, "history is power," and warns, "Students who

do *not* know their own history or how to think critically about historical assertions will be

ignorant and helpless before someone who does claim to know it. Students need to be able to

fight back" (p. 12). Furthermore, opportunities to study curriculum that is more multiculturally

well-rounded, also open doors for students to draw inspiration and courage from the heroic deeds

of imperfect people, especially when their stories are presented honestly and holistically

(Loewen, 2010). As teachers challenge their own racial attitudes (Ford, 2005), continually

research the experiences and contributions of diverse populations (Delpit, 2006) and help

students to explore the connections between and applications of diverse perspectives,

experiences and contributions within each discipline (Banks, 2006; Loewen, 2010; Tatum,

1997), they can more adequately equip their students to understand the world(s) in which they

currently live and to make decisions regarding if and how they would like to contribute or

change the way that it functions (Loewen, 2010).

Understanding and Activating Community Funds of Knowledge

Instructional practices that focus on deficits, or what students are lacking, lead to what

Delpit (2006) describes as "under teaching" (p. 175). Levy (1996) notes, "A teacher who draws

out rather than fills up starts with the innumerable experiences the children have already had and

then finds ways to connect these experiences to the concepts or principles of the curriculum" (p.

13). One valuable step in infusing curriculum and instruction with diverse experiences,

contributions and perspectives is to actively seek to understand the *funds of knowledge* available

through students, their parents and other professionals and members of their communities, and to

apply such ways of knowing in substantive ways (Ford, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008). González, Andrade, Civil and Moll (2009) define *funds of knowledge* as "historically accumulated bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household functioning and well-being" (p. 116). Learning more about students' families, their cultural values and their ways of thinking about and experiencing academic disciplines can provide valuable insight regarding what students know, how they are accustomed to learning and what is important to them and their communities (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2011; Ford, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). In addition to providing resources for helping students to connect with new content, skills and concepts, local community funds of knowledge have the potential to challenge and add to the overall accuracy of more widely taught understandings within academic disciplines (Banks, 2006; Freire, 1970).

According to Moll, et al. (1992), teachers gained a deeper understanding of students' experiences and were better equipped to recognize and appreciate students' background knowledge after engaging in parent interviews and family observations, techniques informed by basic ethnographic research methodology. Of Mexican middle school students who spent time with relatives and community members in both the United States and Mexico, one teacher noticed that they had "background experiences to explore in-depth issues that tie in with a sixth grade curriculum, such as the study of other countries, different forms of government [and] economic systems" (p. 137).

Though the teachers in the study conducted by Moll, et al. (1992), identified specific connections between the background experiences of their students and concepts embedded in their sixth grade curriculum, traditional ways of knowing and doing do not automatically lead to universally applicable forms of capital (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll, 2011). Similarly,

access to social and cultural resources do not always "translate into activation and mobilization" (p. 170), or "the process in which individuals engage to take advantage of an investment to achieve a certain goal" (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll, 2011, p. 178). Thus, rather than stopping at recognition and acknowledgement, researchers and school personnel seeking to glean the most from community funds of knowledge should also study how varying personal and community background knowledge and skills may be activated to lead to different forms of social and cultural capital both within and outside of the communities and contexts in which they are commonly employed (where capital is understood to be both "investments" in different enterprises and the "profits" resulting from such investments) (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll, 2011). In other words, teachers must continually seek ways to help students to recognize, mobilize and convert their background knowledge and experiences into assets, and to decide how they can apply them towards positive educational, communal and personal outcomes in varying contexts.

Just as access to resources does not automatically lead to mobilization/activation, students' high aspirations do not always necessarily result in present-day student "investments" in their future desires (Oyserman, Terry & Bybee, 2002; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). Parents can play a crucial role in both helping students to connect their present behaviors to future possibilities (Oyserman, Terry & Bybee, 2002) and bridging their sense of academic possible selves with their out of school experiences (Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006), especially when they have "substantive" rather than "superficial" ways to be involved (Ford, 2011). In an intervention intended to help African American middle school students to consider academic mindsets and behaviors that would lead to imagined positive future selves, Oyserman, Bybee and Terry (2002) harnessed some of the resources that parents can offer by including

opportunities for students to conduct informational interviews with them. Additionally, involving parents and other local community members in classroom learning processes may provide students with opportunities to both shape and, in some cases reconstruct, their perceptions of who learners and practicers of disciplines are and how what they are learning extends beyond the classroom (Anderson, 2007). Finally, while much scholarship related to *funds of knowledge* has focused on the interactions taking place in students' homes with parents and other adults, Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll (2011) suggest that observing and learning more about the bodies of knowledge produced and stored up through students' interactions with each other may offer additional insights.

Bridging and Making the Most of Diverse Student Languages

Deeply connected to a person's sense of identity (Gay, 2010; Delpit, 2006), language is a facet of culture that can greatly influence students' interactions and experiences within the classroom and beyond. The language or dialect that students speak at home or within their communities may or may not be the same as that which is most commonly associated with *Standard English* (Devereaux, 2010). Additionally, Delpit (2006) notes that students may not always demonstrate the full extent of their fluency in Standard English. This may be captured by the difference between *linguistic performance* and *linguistic competency*, where the former describes "what one does" with a language and the latter, "what one is capable of doing" (Delpit, 2006, p. 52). Recognizing the interconnectedness of language, culture and identity (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010) and examining and responding to the influences and value of diversity in language contribute to relevance in curriculum and instruction. While the dialects and languages spoken at home may be closely associated with the people and communities that students love and identify with most, competence and engagement in Standard English also serves as a gateway to broader

social and economic opportunities (Delpit, 2006; Devereaux, 2014). Delpit (2006) poses the question of how to embrace the connection between students' identity and predominant language choices and the power and access afforded by Standard English when the two are different. Critical examinations of language may provide bridges between students' languages and dialects and Standard English (Devereaux, 2010; Godley & Minnici, 2008), while also affording opportunities to disrupt the notion of *correct* and *incorrect* dialects, learn and discuss contexts in which it might be beneficial to engage in language *style-switching* and explore the contemporary and historical relationships between language, power, identity and community membership (Devereuax, 2010; Devereaux & Wheeler, 2012; Godley & Minnici, 2008). Guiding students through ideological and comparative and contrastive studies of the language patterns used at home, at school, and in other contexts (such as discipline-specific professional settings), has the potential to both "help students to become more aware of language choices that they make as readers, writers, speakers, and listeners…" and train students to embrace and assist others in appreciating the "natural dialect diversity found in any language" (Godley & Minnici, 2008, p. 342).

Incorporating Student Interests

As students come to schools from a variety of different backgrounds and with interests and assets that sometimes differ from those traditionally affirmed in classroom environments (Ford, 2011), it is important for educators to promote a setting that both creates opportunities for students' interests to be explored and encourages the development of new ones (Gay, 2010; Heath, 1983; Tomlinson, 2003). Describing culturally responsive teaching, Gay (2010) suggests, "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make the learning environment more relevant to and effective for

them" (p 31). While seeking to understand the customs and values of students' communities can provide helpful information about their cultural backgrounds (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008), teachers must be careful not to overgeneralize or make assumptions regarding students' interests, points of reference or preferences (Gay, 2010). Conducting periodic interest surveys is one among several ways to get to know students' interests at the beginning and throughout the year, especially as the class begins new units (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011).

While the above sections have focused on principles and strategies for helping students to build connections between the formal classroom curriculum and their own lives (including the cultures with which they and other members of their communities identify), the next sections will detail reasons why critical and reflective thinking are meaningful and useful components to curriculum and instruction for African American students.

Reflective and Critical Thinking

In addition to building meaningful curriculum and instruction through infusion of and connections to facets of diverse cultures, students benefit from opportunities to process and interrogate what they are learning and its applications within their specific environmental contexts (Azano, 2011; Cortes, 2011; Gay, 2010; Loewen, 2010). For African American students, this may include deliberate opportunities to engage in critical and reflective thinking about the cultural messages to which they are exposed (Cortes, 2011; Gay, 2010) and the "genius" of the contexts in which they live, work and play (Azano, 2011; Levy, 1996, p. 30). The following paragraphs will provide more details about connections between critical and reflective thinking and creating relevant classroom experiences for students of color.

Critical Consumerism

Identity Based Motivation theory suggests that people often choose to act in culturally congruent ways and that perceptions of cultural congruency are malleable (Oyserman, 2013). As students encounter an abundance of cultural messages through mass media (Cortes, 2001), daily interactions (Lee, 2011) and textbook content (Gay, 2010; Loewen, 2010), relevant curriculum and instruction trains students to exercise critical consumerism (Gay, 2010). To support their growth as "critical, reflective, quality thinkers and decision makers," Gay (2010) encourages her postsecondary students to examine the nature of different sources of knowledge, to seek new ways of organizing and integrating data and ideas, and to "push the boundaries of their present knowledge frames by looking for deeper meaning and principles in descriptive texts" (p 231). Among the goals of teaching students to question the cultural messages that are communicated through resources within and outside of the classroom is that they would be able to "[assess] the quality of their culturally diverse beliefs and behaviors" (Gay, 2010, p. 231).

Cortes (2011) suggests integrating studies of mass media as means of training students to distinguish between the usefulness of revisable generalizations and the danger of stereotypes that characterize groups of people as homogenous, persisting despite the presentation of new and contrasting evidence. Cortes's suggestion is accompanied by instructions to first teach students how to distinguish between generalizations and stereotypes and later to assist them in looking for patterns within popular media, so that they may be equipped to "identify image patterns, including patterns of group treatment" and evaluate whether or not what they are encountering in popular media is evidence of stereotyping (p. 10). In addition to assisting students in identifying and interrogating stereotypes and combatting the effects of internalizing them, critical consumerism may also entail helping students to seek to more adequately them understand their own

cultures and the cultures of others. According to Banks (2008), education that honors the values and norms of traditionally underrepresented people "help[s] students to understand how factors such as time of immigration, social class, region, religion, gender, exceptionality, and education influence the behaviors and values of both individuals and subgroups within an ethnic group" (p 56). Doing such may involve training students with basic, yet authentic, skills and habits of mind employed by professionals who study the human experience and the documentation of history, such as ethnographers (Heath, 1983; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) and historiographers (Loewen, 2010). Loewen (2010) notes that several biases, inaccuracies and erroneous details have been recorded or implied through textbooks, historical landmarks and other generally respected sources. In response, he encourages educators to teach students how to consider the variety of factors that influence how history is recorded and passed down through the ages. Important queries include when and by whom details were recorded, the social and political characteristics of the time in which they were documented, and what perspectives were included and omitted from among those who would have experienced or been affected by different events and circumstances.

Engaging Students Where They Are: Examining "Place"

Not only is it beneficial for students to be able to think critically about the messages they are encountering within and outside of the classroom, but it is also essential for African American students to have opportunities to reflect upon and critically examine the environments in which they live and interact, further connecting curriculum to lived contexts. Azano (2011) shares, "A critical pedagogy of place could potentially allow students to view place, its norms, limits, and possibilities as a reciprocal and malleable concept they can affect" (p 10). Critical and reflective thinking, or guiding students in seeking the deeper influences and nuances in regards

to how people relate and function within their various environments, may also involve helping them to look for the everyday "genius" of their communities, or the qualities that make places unique (Levy, 1996, p. 30). Levy (1996) writes,

> Familiar objects that children take for granted are filled with intrigue and meaning when we explore their origins. One can start with almost any object or idea and, through questioning, reflecting, and imagining, see through it like a window into the depth and breadth of the world. The fundamental principle is to set learning in the context of reality, where children need to develop knowledge and skills to make decisions or complete tasks relevant to their lives (p. xvi).

Azano (2014) provides several example questions for helping students to first apply concepts and phenomena found in standardized humanities and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) curricula to their local environments and then to draw connections to broader topics and contexts. In one example (related to the prevalence of surface mining and chemical spills in specific rural locales), Azano (2014) suggests exploring questions such as, "how do different communities respond to disaster…What are the politics influencing natural resources in other places," and "how are these similar or different from my community." Guiding students through such practices of inquiry not only has the potential to help students to "engage at a local level as a scaffold to reach more global perspectives," but also to connect seemingly disparate disciplines such as earth science and economics (Azano, 2014).

One way that teachers can guide students in exploring local and larger contexts is through taking a look at goods and services prevalent in their local communities and exploring the resources, skill sets and changes (demographic, political, ideological and economic) that have influenced their desirability and access (DeJesús & Antrop-González, 2006). Employing

strategies that encourage students to explore the relationships, systems and dynamics within their local environments may also assist them in being able to "identify and analytically interpret the challenges affecting their communities" (Azano, 2011, p. 1) as well as less noted, but valuable, information about the histories and contributions of the diverse populations living there (DeJesús & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006).

Meaningful Contributions

Exploring Roles and Agency

Some scholars focus on the importance of creating connections between curriculum content and students' lived experiences (Gay, 2010; Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004), while others advise using curriculum to bridge who students are with who they would like to become (Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). Whether focusing on the current pertinence to students lives or the applicability of curriculum to their future prospects, the extent to which students are able to both identify a sense of utility to their own lives and see how they can personally contribute to the work and conversations within the classroom and overall discipline can influence whether or not they construct identities that "include the need" for continual studies in an area (Anderson, 2007, p. 10). Additionally, students' experiences can add to the development of a more comprehensive curriculum (Banks, 2006; Freire, 2009). Banks' (2008) ideas regarding knowledge construction suggest that the content of textbooks is influenced by the backgrounds and experiences of those who write and publish them. Considered from this angle, the perspectives of students and the communities to which they belong can reshape and enrich potentially incomplete and otherwise accepted understandings regarding how to approach problem solving, the usefulness of different skills and the significance and consequences of different events and phenomena (Freire, 2009).

Thus, facilitating spaces for students to consider and assume roles as contributors to dialogues and agents of change creates important opportunities for student growth, shaping the discourses within disciplines and for the continual preparation of a well-informed and well-equipped citizenship (Azano, 2011; Banks, 2008; Darling-Hammond, Williamson & Hyler, 2007; Gay, 2010; Loewen, 2010). Regarding preparing students for civic involvement, Azano (2011) refers to the "reciprocal nature of one's relationship to 'place' (p. 9). With African American students in mind, Gay (2010) and Banks (2008) also consider the idea of civic engagement and how to prepare students to simultaneously be local community-builders and global citizens. In the interest of cultivating care for the wellbeing of others (Banks, 2008; Gay, 2010) and of facilitating student consideration of how their choices influence an ever evolving local and larger context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), relevant curriculum and instruction encourages student reflection upon their roles within local and larger communities--with deliberate connections drawn between who they are now, desirable possible future identities (Oyserman, 2013) and the general and discipline-specific specific strategies that will help them to get there (Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2002).

There are several ways that curriculum and instruction can serve as a bridge between students current "frameworks of meaning" (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011, p. 53) and the habits of mind and decision-making processes of professionals. In addition to including opportunities for critical thinking that address issues of personal and larger scale significance (Azano, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Williamson & Hyler, 2007; Tomlinson, Kaplan, Renzulli, Purcell, Leppien, & Burns, 2002), beneficial reflective exercises may include prompts and activities that aid students in considering their involvement in discipline-specific tasks, envisioning and positioning themselves doing the discipline in a variety of different contexts, and "considering

similarities and differences between themselves and [professional and disciplinary] practitioners" (Varelas, Martin & Kane, 2012, p. 333). Doing such would also provide guidance for students to "examine and share their sense of self, revisit it, rebuild it, and revise it" while processing new content and skills (Varelas, Martin & Kane, 2012, p. 333).

Students as Producers of Goods, Services and Information

Several research studies, theoretical works and anecdotal accounts espouse the benefits that students reap from engaging real-world "problems" to come up with solutions for authentic audiences (Heath, 1983; Cross, Hudson, Adefope, Lee, Rapacki & Perez, 2012; Levy, 1996; Nasir, Hand & Taylor, 2008). Affording students opportunities to both engage existing proficiencies and develop new techniques as problem solvers and innovators contributes to the meaningfulness of classroom learning experiences (Levy, 1996). One study demonstrates how granting students a space through which to examine their roles as translators within their communities also provided opportunities to serve as producers of goods, services and information. In detailing her ethnography of students, families and teachers in two racially distinct mill industry communities, Heath (1983) describes how teachers responded to discovering that the type of literacy valued by employers and family were different from the extended prose traditionally taught and used for reading and writing instruction in their school curriculum. Observing that students often took on the role of translating the "too tough" language of warranties, guarantees and social services documents, teachers used students' interests, responsibilities and frustrations as prompts for researching and exploring "what makes reading easy" (p 313). With reading and writing instruction situated within a personally meaningful and useful context, students wrote "how-to" manuals, reported on local events and shared their findings with elderly members of their communities. Additionally, as teachers used

students' and their communities' experiences with language as a springboard for both

reconsidering the relevance of literacy as well as developing additional skills that would be

transferrable to new contexts, Heath (1983) observed,

> With imagination, initiative, and the help of some outsiders, teachers were able to
>
> create interest and motivation in the students and to involve them in not only the
>
> reading and writing tasks, but also research tasks which led them to feel the need
>
> for basic word lists, dictionaries, and outside experts. Spelling and punctuation,
>
> clarity and writing, and general neatness of presentation became increasingly
>
> monitored by class members themselves (p. 314).

Perhaps an example of what Nasir, Hand and Taylor (2012) describe as "blurring the line

between domain and cultural knowledge," teachers in Heath's (1983) study reconsidered the role

of literacy as they came to learn and value the communication skills that were most beneficial to

the community's largest job industry and that were commonly enacted through students' social

interactions within their neighborhoods. Teachers also used their new understandings as catalysts

for assisting students in developing literacies that would be useful in other contexts.

Caring *for* Students in Learning Environments

Researchers suggest that experiences of care in the classroom can also play an important role

in the identities that students construct (Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008; Nasir, 2008;

Oyserman, 2013), the cultural messages that take root (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), and the

consequent academic behaviors that students enact (Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012). Gay (2010)

writes,

> Feelings are important, but culturally responsive caring… as an essential part of the
>
> education process is much more. It focuses on caring *for* instead of *about* the personal

well-being and academic success of ethnically diverse students, with a clear understanding that the two are interrelated. While *caring about* conveys feelings of concern for one's state of being, *caring for* is active engagement in doing something to positively affect it (p. 48).

She draws a distinction between *caring about* and *caring for* students, noting that the characteristics associated with the latter are more likely to lead to "high levels of…academic, social, moral, and cultural" performance and student achievement (p. 48). She describes caring *for* students as "encompass[ing] a combination of concern, compassion, commitment, responsibility, and action" and as reflecting "concern for their psychoemotional well-being and academic success, personal morality and social actions, obligations and celebrations, communality and individuality, and unique cultural connections and universal human bonds" (p. 48). Exploring the experiences of adolescents in two, predominately Latino, community-based high schools, Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) found that several students attributed their success and positive sentiments about their experiences in school to feeling that teachers had high expectations, respect and an authentic sense of care for them. Analyzing observations and data from student interviews and focus groups, the researchers that the most meaningful and beneficial forms of caring include "expectation[s] of academic excellence" for students of color (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006, p. 424). According to students, teachers at the two California schools demonstrated caring by listening to their personal and academic concerns, being accessible and available for additional academic support and "insist[ing] on their academic success" (p. 424).

Similar to the experiences of students in Antrop-Gonzalez and De Jesús' (2006) study, research related to the influence of intelligence mindsets also supports the notion that the

expectations of teachers matter to students. In a series of simulation studies related to the

relationship between beliefs about intelligence and teacher-student feedback, Rattan, Good and

Dweck (2012) found that graduate teaching assistants and instructors who demonstrated a fixed

mindset were more likely to comfort poor-performing students by suggesting that not everyone

could be good at math, rather than offering suggestions and expectations for student

improvement in the subject. In a related online study, undergraduate students who were exposed

to a scenario in which they received comfort-based feedback after low performance on a math

assessment were more likely to perceive the professor as having a fixed view of intelligence.

Students with the comfort-oriented feedback scenario were also more likely to assume that the

teacher had low expectations for improvement and little investment in their success. On the

contrary, students who received concrete, strategy-oriented feedback were more likely to feel

motivated to improve and to perceive the teacher as having high expectations and investment for

their growth in the course (Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012).

Just as teacher expectations may be communicated through the nature of the feedback that

they offer students, the degree of teacher investment in building upon students' potential can be

communicated through student access to resources (Nasir & Cooks, 2009), exposure to

challenging curriculum and participation in flexible grouping strategies within the learning

setting (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004). Notably, teacher care can buffer the effects of

potentially stressful social and academic challenges most when experienced by students *as*

support (Spencer, 2008). As teachers are able to create classrooms in which students feel

"psychologically and physically safe," they can also facilitate the development of trust in

relationships with students, thereby also increasing the likelihood of students placing themselves

in positions to receive help or be taught (Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani & Seaton, 2004, p. 254).

Based on literature related to relational, ideological and environmental features that support the continual development of students' engagement, capacities and identities as learners, the following sections detail potentially beneficial characteristics of care for African American students.

High Expectations, Rigor and Support

Tomlinson and Strickland (2004) suggest, "Schools and classrooms successful in developing the capacity of students of color…understand that the messages we convey about our belief in students through the curriculum and instruction that we plan for them will not be missed by students of color in our schools and classrooms" (p 48). Scholars studying within and out of school contexts have suggested that the extent to which students feel cared for and respected can influence their responsiveness to the direction of instructors (DeJesús & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006; Deutsch, 2008; Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004), their motivation to persevere through challenging tasks and beliefs in their abilities to master certain skills (Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012). Studies also suggest that students can interpret the quality and rigor of curriculum (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004), accessibility of resources necessary to learn discipline-specific skills and concepts (Nasir, 2009) and extent to which feedback includes practical strategies for improved performance (Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012), as indications of teachers' beliefs regarding their likelihood of excelling in a subject or discipline. Students can associate lackluster lessons as indicative of a lack of both respect and vision for their futures (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004).

On the contrary, classroom lessons and interactions characterized by rigor, high expectations and care, as demonstrated by the provision of *material*, *relational* and *ideational*

resources[1] (Nasir & Cooks, 2009), support the development of positive learner identities. In addition to challenging and meaningful curriculum, the degree to which teachers share support and resources with students can also influence whether or not students feel that instructors have high expectations for their success (Nasir & Cooks, 2009). In their qualitative study of students participating in a secondary, after school track and field program, Nasir and Cooks (2009) also found a link between students' access to *relational*, *ideational* and *material* artifacts and their practice-linked identities as athletes. In other words, the students who seemed to experience affirming relationships with their coach (relational artifact), guidance and feedback regarding the thought processes of an expert athlete (ideational artifact) and access to the tools and equipment commonly used in training and performance (material artifact) were more likely to suggest having identities linked to the practice of being track athletes and members of the team (Nasir & Cooks, 2009). Within the classroom, Conchas' (2006) study of high-achieving urban youth, found that students were less likely to complete homework when they believed teachers to be indifferent about their "academic future[s]" (p 110). Conversely, challenging curriculum paired with teacher support can serve to increase task-related enjoyment and promote positive self-concept among students (Tomlinson, 2003).

Malleability of Intelligence

In addition to providing a combination of challenge, high expectations and support, classroom experiences that reinforce understandings of intelligence as fluid can positively impact

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[1] In analyzing data for a study of high school track and field as a learning context, Nasir and Cook (2009) identify three types of resources that influence the development of African American students' practice-linked identities. They describe *material resources* as "the way in which the physical environment, its organization, and the artifacts in it support one's sense of connection to the practice." Additionally, they define *relational resources* as "the positive relationships with others in the context" (p 47). *Ideational resources* are described as "the ideas about oneself and one's relationship to and place in the practice and the world, as well as ideas about what is valued or good" (p 47).

student motivation and performance (Dweck, 2008). Among adolescents making the difficult transition from elementary to junior high school, Dweck (2008) noted that students who believed that intelligence could grow were more likely to "mobilize their resources for learning" (pp. 57-58) when they realized that they could possibly fail a class. While students who demonstrated fixed mindsets experienced a continual decline in grades throughout the first two years, students who believed that their intelligence could grow experienced improvements, potentially because they were more likely to pursue whatever help may have been available to them (Dweck, 2008). As adolescence has been characterized as a period during which the wrestling to understand and define one's identity can be particularly salient (Erikson, 1968), those who view intelligence as a stagnant trait that cannot be changed are more likely to link their poor performance on classroom tasks to more permanent aspects of their identities. Furthermore, adolescents with fixed mindsets may interpret the daily demands of the classroom as tests that provide answers to such questions as, "Am I smart or dumb…Am I cool or nerdy? Am I a winner or a loser?" (Dweck, 2008, p 58).

In addition to being more likely to pursue help, African American students with a growth mindset regarding intelligence may also be more prone to look for ways to gain from, rather than dismiss, difficult feedback (Dweck, 2008). When told that they would be receiving feedback on an essay from an Ivy League professor, students who had a fixed mindset were more likely to ignore, shift blame and/or feel threatened by challenging feedback than those who understood intelligence to be fluid. Moreover, programming that reinforces the idea that intelligence is fluid, rather than fixed, has the potential to buffer the negative effects of stereotype threat (Aronson, Fried & Good, 2002). Stereotype threat, or the "risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group" (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797), has the potential to negatively affect African American's students' performance, particularly in areas in which they

care about their success (Steele, 1998). Aronson, Fried and Good's (2002) intervention presented African American college students with the task of writing to encourage younger students regarding the malleability of intelligence after having watched a video about the neuroscience of the brain making new connections. The scholars found that students who participated in the malleability intervention group later achieved higher grades than the control group and reported greater enjoyment of the "academic process" than their African American peers participating in each of the other conditions (Aronson, Fried & Good, 2002, p. 8).

Defining the concept of *readiness*, Tomlinson (2003) notes, "a student's knowledge, understanding, and skill related to a particular sequence of learning…can vary widely over time, topic, and circumstance" (p. 3). In addition to providing strategy-based feedback (Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012), teachers may also demonstrate and promote a fluid approach to understanding student abilities through flexible grouping practices (Tomlinson, 2003). Curriculum and instruction that reflect the belief that students' intelligences and abilities in different disciplines can grow further encourage students to invest in the academic learning processes taking place within the classroom.

Resilience, Challenge and Growth

In addition to communicating respect and vision for students, rigorous curriculum and instruction can also work to cultivate resilience and opportunities to see the potentially positive connections between experience of challenge and personal growth. Whether understood primarily as a capacity (Spencer, et al., 2006; Theron, Cameron, Didkowsky, Lau, Liedenberg & Ungar, 2011), outcome (Reis, Colbert & Hébert, 2004), or adaptive process (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick & Sawyer, 2003; Luthar, Cicchetti & Beker, 2000), the works of several scholars point to a relationship between challenge and the development and/or exercising of

resilience (Dweck, 2002; Olsson et al., 2003; Spencer & Tinsley, 2008). Similar to intelligence

(Dweck, 2008; Aronson, Fried & Good, 2002), resilience is a fluid trait that can be developed

(Olsson, et al., 2003; Reis, Colbert & Hébert, 2004) and/or promoted (Spencer & Tinsley, 2008).

Reflecting upon the lives of several people that have been recognized as innovators and

creative geniuses, Dweck (2002) observes that perseverance through challenging circumstances

contributed to mastery in the areas for which they are most celebrated. She shares,

> They were not people who shrank back from challenge or held back their effort for fear
>
> of revealing ignorance or low ability. Nor were they people who were daunted by the
>
> inevitable obstacles that arise in the pursuit of anything difficult. Instead their
>
> extraordinary commitment converted their challenge into genius (p. 36).

African American students may benefit when they have opportunities to explore resilience

through characters in developmentally appropriate young adult literature (Dinkins, in progress)

as well as multicultural biographical accounts that detail the challenges and supports encountered

by famous people who have persevered in spite of obstacles (Tomlinson et al, 2002). When using

young adult literature (Dinkins, in progress) or biographical accounts to help students to see

example of how ethnically diverse celebrities, historical figures, or other young adults have

encountered and overcome challenges, teachers should be careful not to assume that students will

naturally make connections with the characters that they are studying (Gay, 2010; Nasir, 2005).

Rather, through their explanation of a model designed to promote quality curriculum and

instruction for high potential learners, Tomlinson, et al. (2002) offer some helpful strategies for

helping students to explore the commonalities between themselves and the people that they

study. For example, in exploring a unit through the lens of identity, teachers may first prompt

students to consider the personal attributes that helped the person about whom they are learning

to accomplish their goals and overcome obstacles along the way. In order to facilitate students

drawing connections to their own lives, the teacher may then present them with an opportunity to

explore what commonalities they share with the person of study (Tomlinson, et al., 2002).

Using the stories of others as well as other classroom resources and content to prompt

students to think about the ways in which they have demonstrated resourcefulness and resilience

may also assist in developing positive coping strategies in preparation for risk factors that they

may encounter in the future (Spencer et al., 2006). Curriculum and classroom experiences that

provide space for students to recognize and consider personal examples of how they have

successfully navigated challenging situations increases the likelihood that they will overcome

when they encounter more complex problems (Spencer & Tinsley, 2008).

The Present Study

In the above sections, I have detailed several areas through which teachers and school

personnel can approach both improving the meaningfulness and usefulness of curriculum and

instruction for African American students and creating relational and environmental contexts in

which such improvements can be optimized. Synthesized, the examples above suggest that

relevant curriculum and instruction have the potential to work together with teacher care *for*

students (Gay, 2010) to support student motivation and engagement, learning and retention and

identity congruence with classroom and disciplinary learning processes. Additionally, several of

the characteristics above necessitate research and/or reflection on the part of teachers to add to

and work in conjunction with the content knowledge that they continually develop. They suggest

that teachers reflect upon and, in some cases, revise the ways that they think about a myriad of

concepts related to relevance and care as they allow themselves to assume the role of students of

their students. Therefore, caring *for* students and investing in the provision of rich, relevant

curriculum and instruction has the potential to equip teachers all the more to support students in assuming roles as learners and doers and to grow in their adeptness for recognizing and developing student capacity.

Although not comprehensive, the characteristics listed above are many. In order to make the data collection process manageable, the characteristics will be distilled into three broader categories that capture the common themes found within each. Relevance I will consider relevance broadly in terms of characteristics that *build connections,* encourage students to *engage in critical and reflective thinking* and afford them opportunities to *see and make contributions*. Additionally, Gay's (2010) guidance regarding how to identify what it looks like to care *for* students includes many different attitudes and relational characteristics. The concept of *caring for* students can be demonstrated through teachers who "honor [students'] humanity, hold them in high esteem, expect high performance from them,…use strategies to fulfill their expectations" and "model academic, social, personal, and moral behaviors and values for students to emulate" (Gay, 2010, p. 48). To study the manifestations and direct application of Gay's conception of care could encompass a study in and of itself. Thus, for the purposes of this project the concept of caring *for* students will be explored with regard to how teachers honor students and encourage and model beneficial values through combining high expectations with rigor and support, demonstrating an understanding of intelligence as malleable and modeling and exploring with students the relationship between challenge, resilience and growth. While they could arguably fit into multiple categories, Figure 1 on the next page summarizes how I have grouped and conceptualized the characteristics of relevance and care described throughout my literature review for the purposes of this capstone project.
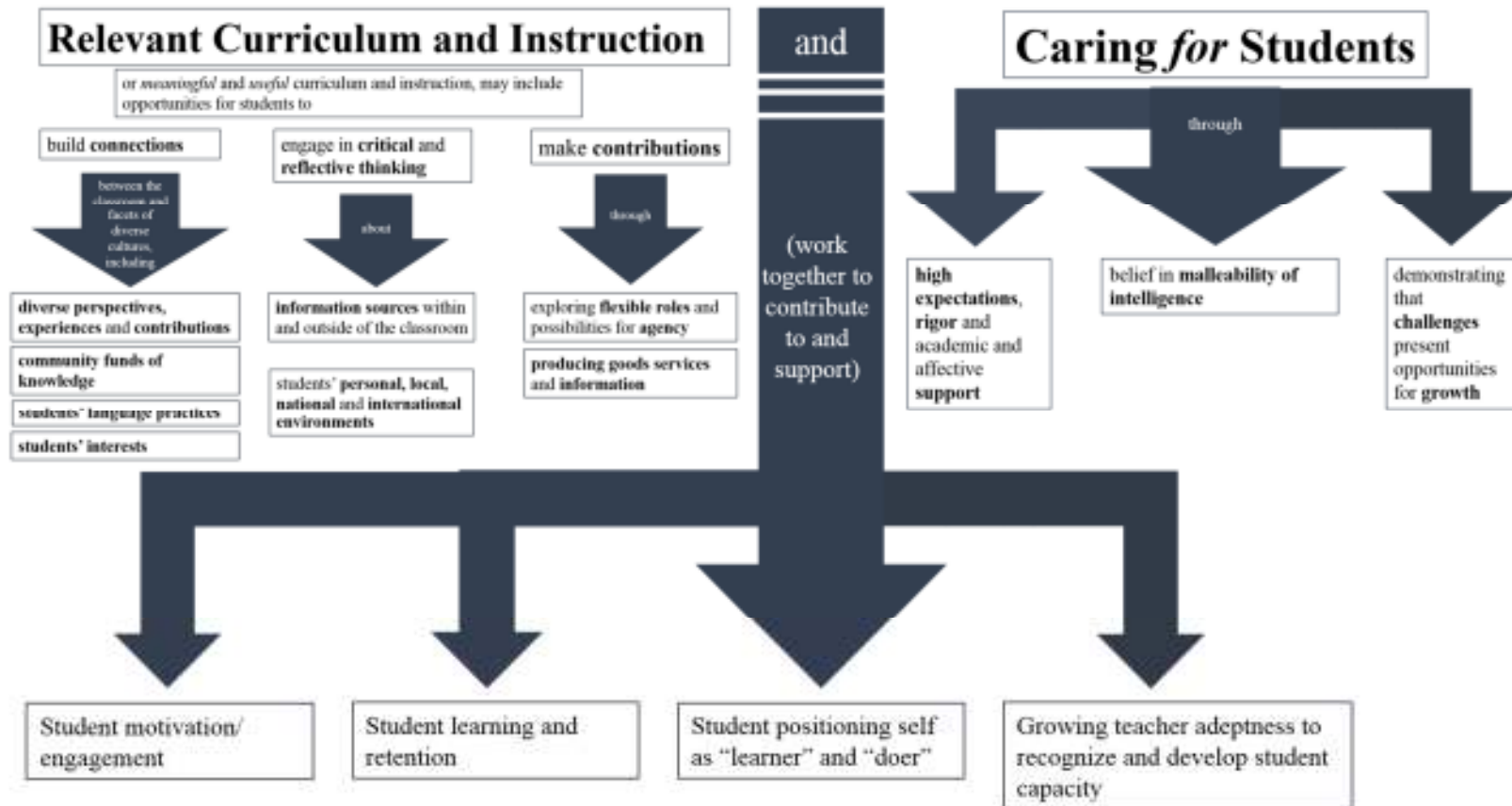
Figure 1. Relevance and care and potential influences on African American students' experiences within the classroom. This figure

illustrates a conceptual framework for considering characteristics of relevance in curriculum and instruction and care for students.

In the sections below, I will share how I intend to explore the characteristics embedded in Figure 1 at Joseph N. Weaver High School.

METHODOLOGY

One purpose of this exploratory capstone project was to understand how relevance and care *for* students was enacted at Joseph N. Weaver High School, specifically in ways that mirrored a framework for conceptualizing school contexts that support African American students assuming roles as learners. Equally as important, the second objective was to provide a literature and context-informed resource to assist the administration at Weaver High School with supporting its faculty's continual growth towards using curriculum and instruction as vehicles for deeper meaningfulness, usefulness and care in the educational experiences accessible to students of color. My conceptual framework (Figure 1) guided the way I looked for indications of relevance and care. Specifically, I looked for aspects of curriculum and instruction that reflected research-inspired examples that I categorized under the umbrellas of building connections, opportunities for critical and reflective thinking and encouragement to make contributions within the classroom and broader communities. *Care* is a multi-faceted construct (Gay, 2010). For the purposes of this project, I narrowed my initial focus to how teachers 1) offered students high expectations, rigor and academic and affective support, 2) communicated and demonstrated intelligence as malleable, and 3) communicated and demonstrated challenge and resilience as potentially presenting opportunities for growth.

Project Design

According to Merriam (2009), the case study approach is useful for studying and offering "in-depth description," or insight, about a "bounded system" (p. 40). In addition to being

descriptive, a case study design has the benefit of being particularistic (Merriam, 2009). For this

capstone project a case study approach was appropriate to guide my methodological design

because I examined *particular* phenomena (relevance and care) within a specific context, or

bounded system, Joseph N. Weaver High School (JWHS). The value of this project could be

described, at least in part, as *instrumental*. My aims were to both provide responsive

recommendations, resources and support to the project site and to contribute to a broader,

developing understanding related to improving the quality of educational experiences for African

American students (Merriam, 2009).

While this project served instrumental purposes, Weaver High School also offered an

intrinsically interesting setting within which to explore the concepts of relevance and care

(Merriam, 2009). The relative youthfulness of the school, the district's focus on encouraging the

creative faculties of students, and the school's geographic location in a suburb of a small, South-

Atlantic city with a largely rural student population together provided a fascinating intersection

of characteristics. In addition to aligning with a desire to respond to the needs of a specific

community entity, purposive sampling is a useful and commonly accepted norm for case study

designs (Merriam, 2009). For this project, Joseph N. Weaver High School was purposefully

selected because it served African American students as a minority population, was led by an

administrator who desired to continue to remove barriers to African American student

participation and success in intellectually-challenging, advanced-level coursework, and was part

of a district that encouraged innovation and the development of learning skills useful for all life

stages. All of these factors considered, Weaver High provided a geographically complex and

resource-rich community within which to study how high school teachers approached caring for

and providing relevant curriculum and instruction to African American students in ways that

would potentially support their constantly developing identities as learners.

In addition to purposefully selecting the broader context for this project, the study of

smaller, embedded "cases" was instrumental to both my understanding and analysis of the setting

and my preparation to make recommendations based on my findings. While I employed a variety

of data collection strategies (as detailed below), my informants were a purposefully selected

sample of teachers and administrators who served African American students at Weaver High

School. Below, I have detailed my process for identifying and recruiting teachers and school

administrators to participate in the study.

Recruitment and Study Participants

The process for identifying potential participants for this project began with a meeting

with the school principal. After discussing my interest in studying relevance and care and how it

aligned with Dr. Hughes' desire to consider ways of continuing to minimize barriers to African

American students' success, I asked him to identify several teachers who collectively taught a

myriad of disciplines and who may also represent a variety of levels of expertise in serving

African American students. With the assistance of the administrative assistant, I conducted a

brief informational meeting with willing teachers and followed up with them periodically to

share about the progress of plans for the study and to survey their interest in participating.

Additionally, at the beginning of the 2016 spring semester, I attended two JWHS staff meetings,

one in the morning and another in the afternoon, to introduce myself to attending teachers and to

assess their interest in my capstone work, I extended to all attending teachers an invitation to

consider participating in my study, specifically by allowing me to observe within their

classrooms for brief, 10 minute visits. The combination of teacher responses from meetings at

the school and follow up correspondences provided an initial pool of between 25-30 teachers

from which to further recruit study volunteers. In most cases, volunteers specified several classes

within which they were willing to allow me to observe. In all cases, I asked for participants'

permission to begin observations and classroom visits. With the help of a JWHS administrator, I

obtained and consulted demographic information to determine the classes within which study

volunteers directly served at least three African American and/or multiracial students and

focused my data collection efforts there. I also identified additional potential volunteers to

participate in longer, 55-80 minute classroom observations and interviews simultaneous to the

process of data collection through the 10 minute classroom visits and asking for additional

recommendations from teachers and school personnel. I selected teachers for class period

observations and interviews based on recommendations from the school principal and other

school faculty and staff during informal conversations. During such conversations, I requested

the names of teachers who did a great job engaging and demonstrating care for African

American students. Additionally, I identified one teacher participant after observing students

participating enthusiastically during a brief, 10 minute observation in the instructor's class.

Finally, I identified another potential participant when, during our initial introduction to one

another, she shared with me about herself that it was essential that I come visit her. In all cases,

teacher study participants were recommended by at least one, and often more, of their

administrators and or colleagues.

Altogether, approximately 20 Weaver High School teachers and administrators

participated in a combination of brief classroom visits, observations and/or semi-structured

interviews to inform this capstone project. Study participants included teachers of social and

physical sciences, English, foreign languages and the fine arts, and had professional teaching and

or administrative experience ranging from three to over 25 years. While the school staff was

predominately Caucasian, I collected data from teachers and administrators from a variety of

different racial backgrounds, among which included African American, multi-racial Asian and

Caucasian school professionals. Below, I have shared greater detail with regard to my data

collection methods.

Data Collection and Sources

I considered three major conditions to determine which data collection strategies would

contribute most to the overall design of this project. First, I needed to include efficient strategies

that would help me to identify patterns in the overall culture of relevance and care at JWHS

within a four to eight week, intensive period in the school. Secondly, data collection would also

need to include strategies for gaining examples of relevance and care, but with a critical

attentiveness towards possible opportunities for growth and improvement. Identifying positive

examples and potential growth opportunities would contribute to context-specific,

recommendations and a teacher-inspired resource for the school. Lastly, data collection strategies

would need to reflect norms for high quality, qualitative research. In the next few paragraphs, I

have detailed the objectives and logistics for each of the primary and secondary data collection

strategies I used to inform my work at Weaver High School.

Class Period Observations

I conducted several classroom observations to explore and better understand some of the

"complex interactions" that took place in the classroom as a "natural social setting" (Marshall &

Rossman, 2006, p. 99). My objectives for the extended classroom observations were:

1. To gain a feel for how teachers approached connecting with their students and what strategies teachers used in relation to the six, umbrella categories detailed in my conceptual framework (*Appendix A*).

2. To find positive examples and to identify opportunities for growth and improvement to confirm, revise and/or add to my conception of relevant curriculum and instruction.

3. To gain a sense for how teachers responded to new and developing knowledge about their students as students interacted with teachers, the curriculum and each other.

4. To gain positive, context-specific examples of "relevance and care in practice" for my final analysis and product.

Toward these ends, I observed several classroom teachers for between two and eleven, 55-80 minute classroom sessions over the course of eight weeks. I focused on gathering observational data primarily from teachers who either had reputations among administrators, specialists and/or peers for demonstrating care and providing engaging curriculum and instruction for African American students or who provided non-discipline-specific instructional. In some cases, I identified additional teachers through observing engaging lessons during brief classroom visits or through casual interactions on-site at the school. As some aspects of the recruitment and data collection processes occurred simultaneously, I allowed for flexibility in design for the discovery and addition of project participants as I met more JWHS faculty and/or learned of some of their instructional approaches.

In order to capture some of the variability in how relevance and care were enacted across different academic disciplines and to have a variety of examples to draw from, I observed seven teachers who collectively represented STEM, English, social studies and fine arts disciplines.

Often serving first generation, low income and/or minority students, AVID classrooms "[target] students in the academic middle, who have the desire to go to college and are capable of completing rigorous curriculum using the will to work hard…" (AVID Center, 2014). As a setting for non-discipline specific instructional support, I also observed within one, combined ninth and tenth grade AVID classroom, both to see if and how other disciplines were connected to students' future goals and lived experiences and to hear what types of classroom conversations occurred between the teacher and students' regarding students' engagement in other classes. For the STEM teacher, I collected data in both an Advanced Placement science course and a science class especially tailored towards students interested in medical practice or research.

In an effort to narrow my focus for the sake of "later recall" (Merriam, 2008, p. 129), I deliberately focused on specific category combinations during each of the three class sessions for each teacher. Although I specified a focus for each observation, I later coded my field notes for all six categories so that I could have as many examples and opportunities for identifying emerging patterns and themes within the data as possible. The specific categories upon which I focused for each 55-80 minute class period observation are detailed below in Table 1.

	Humanities Class/Teacher A	STEM Class/Teacher B	Class/Teacher C	AVID Class/Teacher D
Observation #1	Relevance-BC, CR, CON	Relevance-BC, CR, CON	Relevance-BC, CR, CON	Relevance-BC, CR, CON
Observation #2	Care-ExRS, MI, CG	Care-ExRS, MI, CG	Care-ExRS, MI, CG	Care-ExRS, MI, CG

Observation #3	Relevance and Care-BC, CR, CON, ExRS, MI, CG	Relevance and Care-BC, CR, CON, ExRS, MI, CG	Relevance and Care-BC, CR, CON, ExRS, MI, CG	Relevance and Care-BC, CR, CON, ExRS, MI, CG
Relevance and Care Codes: (BC) Building connections, (CR) Critical and reflective thinking, (CON) Contributions (ExRS) High expectations, rigor and support, (MI) Malleability of intelligence, (CG) Challenges, resilience and growth				

Table 1: Class session observation schedule and relevance and care codes

In order to be as unobtrusive as possible, I did not use a video or tape recorder during classroom observations (Merriam, 2009). Instead, I took detailed notes while observing classes, directing my attention primarily to the interactions between the classroom teacher(s) and students, including student responses to teacher promptings and feedback. Additionally, I wrote diagrams to help me remember the ways classrooms were organized, notes about the number of students present, and analytic memos written in a separate color for the sake of distinction (Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 194). I assigned each teacher a different colored spiral notebook within which I documented field observations and used *Appendix B* as an abbreviated guide to remind me of the types of indicators that I would be looking for within the classroom and when recording additional descriptions, impressions and insights after observations (Merriam, 2009).

Occasionally, I also participated in brief, informal conversations with teachers to clarify my understanding of activities or processes that I observed during class sessions. Such

conversations also provided insights worthy of follow-up and elaboration during longer, semi-structured interviews. I took handwritten notes of brief, informal conversations.

Semi-structured Interviews

In addition to class session observations, I also conducted semi-structured interviews as an additional, primary data collection strategy. Through semi-structured interviews, I sought to understand more about the thought processes, inherent challenges, and accessible resources related to caring for students and making curriculum meaningful and useful. The data collected through interviews were also useful for informing what recommendations to make to JWHS administrators for the type of support to offer teachers for continuing to grow in these areas. Finally, this data source provided opportunities for asking questions about the curricular and instructional practices I observed teachers implementing during classroom observations. While most semi-structured interview questions were drafted ahead of time in preparation for the project, others were informed by the data collected from classroom observations (Dimeo, 2010; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). While allowing the semi-structured interview protocol to guide the interview process, I asked questions in an order to facilitate the nature flow of the conversation. Additionally, when helpful, I asked follow up questions to clarify and pursue deeper understandings of participants' responses.

I conducted and analyzed eight interviews with six participants, averaging approximately 50 minutes each in length. Included within the total number, I interviewed the school principal in order to gain a better since for his overarching vision for relevance and student care at JWHS and the resources and support available to teachers as they pursue both concepts. I also interviewed both the gifted teacher and AVID instructor with the goal of understanding how non-discipline-specific resources and classes may have served as contexts for care and creating relevance for

African American students. I have included the semi-structured interview protocols, each

composed of open-ended questions, for teachers, the school principal and the AVID and gifted

resource teachers as *Appendices C, D* and *E* respectively. As the school AVID instructor also

served as a discipline-specific teacher, I used questions from both *Appendices C* and *E* to guide

our conversations.

Granted the approval of each interviewee, I audio-recorded each interview using a

pseudonym and took brief, handwritten notes. I transcribed audio recordings using the services

of a confidential transcription service to facilitate data management and analysis.

Additional Data Sources

While classroom observations and semi-structured interviews of school personnel served

as my primary sources for data about curricular and instructional practices that promote

relevance and care at JWHS, I also conducted school and classroom walk-throughs and requested

access to material artifacts as secondary resources for understanding the culture of relevance and

care at JWHS. I have briefly detailed the purposes and format of each in the sections below.

Whole-School Walk-through

Although much of the data for this project focused on what took place inside classrooms,

walking through the halls of JWHS served two important logistical and analytical purposes.

First, walking through the halls increased my familiarity with the layout and locations of classes

within the school. In addition, Merriam (2009) suggests that the physical setting is a common

element to note when observing a setting. Walking through the halls and common spaces of

JWHS also allowed me to note visual communications to students and teachers as shared through

posters, signs, announcements and works of art. Doing such helped me to consider the answers to

questions related to, "how…space [is] allocated,…what objects, resources, and technologies are

in the setting," and "what kinds of behavior…the setting [is] designed for" (Merriam, 2009, p. 120), specifically as related to the six categories of relevance and care included in the conceptual framework for this capstone project (Figure 1). A resource that helped guide my observations during the school walkthrough is included as *Appendix G*. I handwrote notes from my initial walk through the school and remained mindful as new messages were added to the common spaces.

Classroom Walk-through Observations

While the longer classroom observations helped me to capture brief storylines among a smaller sample of JWHS teachers with regard to relevance and care, the shorter classroom walk-throughs, or classroom visits, gave me opportunities to capture snapshots of the dynamics of JWHS classrooms more broadly. Like a helicopter tour of a city (Tomlinson, 2015, Interview), brief classroom observations helped me to understand and describe the landscape of the school, with the purpose of looking for patterns across classrooms related to the six categories (in code form, BC, CR, RAC, ExRS, MI and CG) rather than to attach any particular observation or practice to specific instructors.

Classroom visits helped me to gain a sense for the landscape of classroom practices with relevance and care in mind and provided useful insight for understanding the context in which resources that I provide to the school as part of this project may be used. They consisted of twelve brief, 10-15 minute observations, within classes with an enrollment of at least three African American students and among teachers who volunteered to participate in the study. Though some teachers may have taught more than one class serving several African American students, I observed each teacher only once, with most observations occurring over the course of a week. I recorded handwritten notes for classroom visits in a spiral notebook and used a

checklist form (included as *Appendix F*) to note specific indications of the six target relevance and care categories shortly after each.

Material Documents and Artifacts

Finally, to round out my understanding of curricular and instructional processes reflecting relevance and care, I occasionally requested to see material documents or artifacts (Merriam, 2009), primarily, though not exclusively, from teachers who I observed during 55-80 minute class sessions. Material documents included teacher unit outlines, rubrics and exercise and project instructions. Additionally, I made note of other class artifacts that were more readily available in the setting, such as instructions listed on a classroom whiteboard or other tools used to facilitate the educational processes within the classroom, such as teacher webpages. Rather than searching for patterns among material documents and artifacts through content analysis, I had two purposes for gaining access to them as data sources. The first was to gain clarity and deeper insight about specific exercises in which students and teachers engaged in the classroom that may have reflected the categories of relevance and care prioritized in this study (as to also better understand potential ways in which recommendations from my analysis may have been implemented). I requested to see material documents and artifacts when seeking to a more complete picture of a specific classroom activity or strategy employed by a teacher or students. Secondly, I reasoned that material documents and artifacts could be useful for inspiring JWHS teacher-informed strategies for relevance and care useful for including in my final analysis and product for the school. All in all, material documents were most beneficial for providing me a better understanding of the exercises in which students and teachers were engaging during class. I described characteristics of material documents and artifacts using general descriptions that highlighted the broader application of relevance and care strategies.

Data Analysis

Rossman and Rallis (2012) describe data analysis as "the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data" (p. 273). I implemented measures to facilitate my data analysis on an ongoing basis (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). As means of managing my data, I continually noted the date, setting and specific categories relevant to my observation sessions. I also maintained an Excel log and recorded field notes in separate notebooks for each participant in order to facilitate the processes of accounting for, locating and coding collected data. Additionally, while collecting data, I made note of possible patterns as they emerged. Such notes included themes or questions that were of potential value for later consideration.

While my focus was mostly on data collection within the school during the first phase of this project, I transitioned to a more intensive data analysis period after observing and interviewing over the course of approximately eight weeks at Joseph N. Weaver High School. During this more intensive phase of data analysis, I employed both categorical and holistic strategies for understanding relevance and care for African American students at Joseph N. Weaver High School. Because one of the goals of this exploratory project was to see how closely strategies used in JWHS classrooms mirrored aspects of relevance illustrated in my conceptual framework, I used the following categories to code all data sources: (BC) Building connections, (CR) critical and reflective thinking, (CON) contributions, (ExRS) High expectations, rigor and support, (MI) malleability of intelligence, (CG) challenges, resilience and growth. I also included additional child codes to represent the subcategories listed in my conceptual framework (Figure 1) for relevance specifically. For example, I coded an instance of a class engaging in critical and/or reflective thinking specifically about an information source within the classroom as "CR-

S". In this way, I engaged in a deductive analysis process for condensing and determining

patterns within my data (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). To facilitate this process, it was useful to

consult a tool that detailed more specific potential indications of the broader relevance and care

categories specified within my conceptual framework. In order to begin the process of coding

with an alignment to my original, literature-informed thought processes with regard to relevance

and care, I used the tool included as *Appendix F* for examples.

The categories and examples of relevance and care studied throughout this project

included several among many potentially meaningful and useful instructional characteristics,

thought processes and demonstrations of care helpful to African American student learners. A

primary goal for this exploratory study was to see in what ways teacher practices mirrored a

literature-inspired conceptual framework for considering the two constructs. Additionally, an

equally important objective of this project was to create a resource informed by the specific

nature of the context. Thus, I considered possibilities for additional, participant-expressed or

demonstrated categories that emerged from observations, interviews and material resources at

JWHS. I sought to be open-minded to the revision of my "analyst-constructed categories" of

relevance and care to better respond to the needs of the setting (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 278).

Towards this goal, I made notes within the data when I encountered instructional practices or

exercises that were not included on my list of examples or within my framework, but that also

seemed to be engaging, meaningful and/ or useful to students or to demonstrate care, especially

if they were reoccurring. I also looked for cross-categorical themes that emerged from my

understanding of the data.

In order to manage and fully engage this process of sense-making, I first coded

observation notebooks and interview transcriptions with highlighters, a different color designated

for each of the six primary relevance and care categories. Engaging in multiple readings of each data source, I read first with the distinct goals of regaining a sense for the larger context of each data gathering session and quickly jotting down notes or preliminary codes, while limiting my pauses and maintaining a fluid reading flow as much as possible. For interview data, this initial reading also served as a measure for me to correct any discrepancies between the audio recording and the typed transcription. After the initial reading, I focused on color coding data from observations and interviews, highlighting examples with the color corresponding to each code. I also made analytical notes and, when possible and applicable, noted in the margin more specific child categories for relevance. I organized coded data from observations in Excel worksheets, noting quotes and examples corresponding with the categories in my conceptual framework and using an asterisk to note potential instances that seemed to be connected in some way to my categories, but different or more broadly related than the examples in my framework and data collection tools suggested. In this way, I sought to maintain a balance between open-mindedness and focus on the literature-informed constructs. I included a sample of my coded observation data as *Appendix H.*

After reading and color-coding interviews with highlighters, I engaged a similar process using Dedoose software. This facilitated my identification of patterns in not only the appearance of the categories illustrated in my framework, but also useful information about JWHS faculty, the demographics they served and the experiences and thought processes that potentially influenced teachers' and administrators' instructional choices and ways of caring for African American students. For interview and observational data, I also considered the exhaustiveness and mutual exclusivity of categories to determine whether or not it would be beneficial to revise, add to or condense them (Merriam, 2009). Rossman and Rallis (2012) also describe the data

analysis process as "complex and iterative" (p. 282). The nature of this project as an exploratory case study for understanding a particular framework for relevance and care through smaller, embedded cases (JWHS classrooms), provided an opportunity for multiple layers of analysis. While looking to see how curriculum and instruction reflected the various existing and emerging categories, my analysis also resulted in snapshots of how several teachers at JWHS approached relevance and care, as well as a panoramic view of how the concepts are reflected throughout several classrooms throughout the school. In this way, the categories and themes that evolved throughout my analysis informed and were informed by my emerging, holistic understanding of the setting (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

Trustworthiness

Rossman & Rallis (2012) suggest that qualitative research should reflect *trustworthiness* as an indication of a given study's believability (or credibility), integrity and potential usefulness. The authors suggest that *trustworthiness* in qualitative research may be pursued through competent research norms, ethical practices and a sensitivity to the political dynamics of the setting. In greater detail, research that is credible, reliable and useful engages rigorous methodology, accurate reporting, useful descriptions and logical interpretation. Alternately, Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider trustworthiness in terms of "how…an inquirer [can] persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of " (p. 290). I employed several strategies to ensure the *trustworthiness* of data collection, analysis and reporting for this capstone project (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

For the purposes of conducting a rigorous study and reporting accurately about relevance and care within JWHS, I triangulated my data sources through employing several different strategies over an extended period of time within the high school (Lincoln & Guba, 1985;

Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). I collected data through a combination of brief, school

and classroom "walk-through" observations (Tomlinson, Brimijoin & Narvaez, 2008), 55-80

minute classroom observations and semi-structured interviews during an eight week, intensive

period at JWHS. During my *prolonged engagement* within the project setting, I recorded my

thought processes while collecting and analyzing the data through writing analytic memos while

observing and interviewing and recording emerging impressions, interpretations and patterns

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

A primary goal of this project was to provide feedback that would help to positively

shape the relevance and care practices of teachers at JWHS specifically. However, the case study

design of this project has the potential to offer valuable considerations for other contexts serving

African American students as well as insight for the direction of future studies. In an effort to

maximize the usefulness of this project, I pursued recording "thick, rich description[s]" as I

learned within the field (Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 65; Shank, 2006).

Trustworthiness in qualitative research also reflects a respect and care for participants,

including taking measures to preserve the privacy and promised confidentiality of data and

demonstrating an awareness and acknowledgment of the power dynamics that may influence the

access to and dissemination of information within a given setting (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). To

demonstrate respect and care for JWHS participants, I used pseudonyms for the school as a

whole as well as all school personnel and students. With a consideration for the busy schedules

and demanding workloads characteristic of secondary educational settings, I also worked with

administrators and teachers to schedule observations and semi-structured interviews ahead of

time and in accordance with the preferences expressed by the participant. With regard to both

credibility and an acknowledgement of the power dynamics that influence the work and

interactions within any given setting, I checked in periodically, either informally or during

interview sessions, with the teachers who I observed to clarify the accuracy of my record and

understanding of what I saw and heard (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Rossman &

Rallis, 2012). Also, in addition to sampling school personnel to observe and interview based

upon administrative recommendations, I also informally consulted teachers and school staff

members for suggestions and identified additional potential participants through attending school

staff meetings and conducting classroom walkthroughs.

In her study of "successful teachers of African American children," Ladson-Billings

(2009) employs several principles for data collection and analysis that she attributes to Collins'

(1991) explanation of Afrocentric Feminist theory. Collins (2000) notes "those who have lived

through the experiences about which they claim to be experts" more easily establish believability

and credibility when "making knowledge claims" (p. 257). While Collins (2000) statement is an

observation that she relates specifically to African American women in the U.S., Ladson-Billings

(2009) aptly applies the same idea as a principle for her work studying successful teachers of

African American children. Drawing inspiration from Ladson-Billings approach, I strived to

value the "concrete experiences of teachers" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 190) as those who had

"lived through the experiences" of teaching (Collins, 2000, p. 257; Ladson-Billings, 2009) in

ways that aligned with the scope and overall goals of this capstone project. At each phase of this

project, I also pursued considering the practices of teachers with a critical eye and from the

perspective of a peer aspiring to support their desires to meet the needs of their students. With

these goals in mind, I used my pre-established semi-structured interview protocols as well as

questions informed by patterns and teacher practices that emerged while in the field, to pursue

the goal that Ladson-Billings (2009) describes for her interactions with teachers: "to have a good conversation with each" participant (p. 183).

My biography, including my experiences as a student and former teacher, shaped my interactions while at JWHS as well as the understandings, analyses and products that emerged from this project (Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In the section below, I will share a brief personal profile along with some of the "biases, dispositions, and assumptions" that were part of the lens through which I conducted this project (Merriam, 2009, p. 219).

Researcher as Learner: Reflexivity and Interpretive Lens

Traditionally, reflexivity and researcher position have alternately been described in terms of the researcher serving as the primary "instrument" for data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 193; Merriam, 2009). Rossman and Rallis (2012) challenge this terminology, suggesting that it reduces the researcher to a tool. Instead, they propose an alternative way of describing the researcher's role in the field. Borrowing their terminology, I considered reflexivity and my position in terms of taking on the role of "researcher as …learner" (p. 33). Similar to students joining a classroom community, I brought to this capstone project a personal history and belief system that likely affected what I experienced and how I interpreted the data that I collected at JWHS. I am an African American woman who grew up with a reputation as a "high-achiever" through primary and secondary schools with varying degrees of racial and economic diversity. I remember enjoying different aspects of my schooling experience, but I have very few memories of experiencing substantial academic challenge. At four years old, my nursery school teacher told my class, "If anyone ever calls you a 'nobody,' tell them 'I'm Black, and I'm proud, and I am somebody'." This, along with the snapping of the fingers and accompanying neck motion that were culturally associated with attitude and confidence during the time, is my first memory

of being cognizant of my race. From early on, my parents exposed me to a number of different resources, including books about African American inventors and African kings and queens, book signings by African American authors, poetry, community children's festivals and museums that normalized the idea of people of color enjoying success and making contributions in a variety of disciplines.

Additionally, I am a third generation college graduate. I sincerely believe that I have enjoyed great benefits as a result of the educational legacy and experiences in which I have been able to take part. I believe that they, along with the formal and informal teachers who expressed high expectations and provided access and support, assisted me in connecting my identity to innumerable future occupational possibilities. Nevertheless, my tenure as a graduate school student has also helped me to become more aware of my tendency to rely on achievement and performance as measures of personal success. On a regular basis, I have had to make deliberate decisions to value growth and learning over achievement and to believe in the malleability of intelligence and other character virtues. I brought to this study an idea of what it is like to participate in public schooling as a female, African American student, however characteristic or uncharacteristic my personal background and experiences may be. I also carried the assumption that relying on achievement as an essential facet of personal identity can produce mentally and emotionally detrimental effects, and that coming to value growth and opportunities to learn have the potential to produce a more sustainable and fulfilling quality of life. Having served as a teacher for several years, I also entered this capstone project with the assumption that teachers do not intrinsically desire to give students poor quality, disengaging and irrelevant curriculum. On the contrary, and based on the JWHS principal's statement about the willingness of his teachers

to "do whatever it takes" for their students, I assumed that most teachers desired to provide

quality, engaging, meaningful and useful classroom experiences for their students.

Additionally, the teachings of the Bible and my identity as a disciple of Jesus influence

how I understand the nature of reality, the importance of seeking to understand the experiences

of others and of treating people with dignity, and a sense of responsibility towards

responsiveness to improving the conditions of others. Explaining the "principle of recursion" (p.

85) or feedback, Shank (2006) writes,

> Reality is the sum of all that is. Because it is the sum of all that is, we are a part of it.
>
> Because we are a part of it, we can impart change within it. Some aspects of reality are
>
> quite resistant to our feedback, and so recursion is negligible. On the other hand, there are
>
> other aspects of reality that are quite sensitive to feedback, and so any actions we do
>
> along these lines seem to make immediate and real changes (p. 86).

While my own beliefs align with Shank's statement, I approached this project adopting from the

descriptive interpretive paradigm, a desire to "understand the social world" within JWHS "…as

it is (the status quo) from the perspective of individual experience" (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p.

43). In this case, the experiences that I sought to understand were those of teachers as they made

curricular and instructional choices while serving students of color.

Bretherton (2012) shares, "Faithful research is not afraid of moving beyond interpretation

to judgement and such judgement enables and recommends better action" (p. 190). My overall

approach to this project was influenced by my beliefs in the potential to affect change in some,

but not all, facets of reality, in the importance of understanding the perspectives of the teachers

living the social context of this project, and in the value of making "judgements" or

recommendations towards "better action" (Bretherton, 2012, p. 190), specifically to facilitate

administrators and teachers more effectively offering relevant curriculum and instruction and

care in support of African American students assuming roles as learners.

STUDY FINDINGS

A Panoramic View: A Glimpse into the Halls and Classrooms of Joseph N. Weaver High School

During the course of this capstone project, I collected and analyzed data from a variety of participants, sources and academic disciplines. While classroom observations and semi-structured interviews served as primary data sources, classroom visits, a walkthrough of the school and material resources served as secondary data sources. The roles that each played in helping me to understand the practices and ideas of teachers and Joseph N. Weaver as a setting are detailed above. Overall, there were several messages that suggested school pride in the work and achievements of its students within the walls of Joseph N. Weaver High School. Entering the school and walking through the halls, the overall tone of Joseph N. Weaver High School was one of celebrating the work of its students and communicating expectations for the types of character traits they were expected to embody. Throughout the spring semester, a growing display of undergraduate school logos surrounded by the names of seniors were taped to a wall visible immediately after entering the front door of the school. Throughout the brightly lit main halls of Joseph N. Weaver High School, many of the walls showcased a rotating exhibit of photography and digital art created by students. The subjects of the photographs included landscapes, still life, and Caucasian and Latino children and adolescents.

Additional visuals bore witness to the efforts of school faculty and staff to connect to the diverse backgrounds and interests of students. Across from the school auditorium were "larger than life" paintings of playbills from the school's most recent drama productions. The bills were reminders of productions that represented a diverse cross-section of contemporary playwrights and were selected by the drama teacher in part to attract students from a variety of different

racial and ethnic backgrounds. The school library and media center was enclosed within ceiling

to floor glass walls and was often filled with students eating, socializing and taking advantage of

additional learning and production spaces within the area. A library bulletin board featured the

covers of books by authors from a variety of different racial/ethnic backgrounds and about a

variety of different fictional and nonfiction subjects, including at least one related to hunting, a

craft that could potentially be familiar and of interest to students from rural locales.

There were various other characteristics that would seem to promote community and a

desire for students to know the teachers and administrators with whom they would be sharing the

halls. In the main office, hung pictures of student, faculty and staff who were honored for the

month as well as a group picture of the teachers. Additionally, a bulletin board in a heavily

trafficked area displayed pictures and short biographies of new school faculty and staff members.

The school itself was divided into sections that each seemed to house one primary academic

discipline with others scattered throughout. Positive messages that communicated the school's

perceptions and expectations of students were also displayed in the halls. Near the stairs

providing entryway into each of the sections were posters with word art that included a different

combination of adjectives related to community, innovation, compassion, trust, respect, agency,

and learning across a lifetime (just to name a few themes). The positive words included on these

posters mirrored the general esteem expressed by the school principal for his students and

faculty.

Within one section of the school, distinct and sectioned off, posters of people of different

races advertised careers in medicine and science research, one of which asked the viewer, "Can

you see yourself here?" The walls of common areas within the main school halls and within each

section also featured fliers for opportunities such as financial aid workshops and honor and

service clubs and handmade posters for upcoming student events. Additional characteristics

within each section of the school and just outside of each classroom varied, some displaying

student work and/or inspirational quotes such as, "Ability is what you are capable of doing.

Motivation determines what you do. Attitude determines how well you do it," and "Be the

change you want to see in the world."

Just as the characteristics of the setting just outside of teachers classrooms varied,

teachers also used a variety of different instructional strategies with their students. Classroom

processes observed during brief, 10-15 minute visits were different from class to class, and

included teacher lectures, silent, individual test practice, independent writing and project work,

student oral presentations and additional whole group activities such as expressively reading a

play script aloud, reviewing recent assessment questions and practicing Spanish and/or English

vocabulary. In most, if not all classes within which the teacher lectured or verbally led the

activity, it was common for there to be discussion or an exchange of questions and answers

between the teacher and students. Classes observed during 10-15 minute classroom visits

included a combination of social science, STEM, AP, honors and standard level teachers of

African American freshmen and upperclassmen. With particular regard for the categories of

relevance and care included within my conceptual framework (BC, CR, CON, ExRS, MI, CG),

the following are patterns that emerged from these brief, snapshot observations:

- Many teachers offered academic support to students through processes of practice and

  review (ExRS).

- Several teachers also demonstrated academic support and engagement with students

  learning process by circulating through the classroom and/or providing individual

  assistance or practice questions to students (ExRS).

- Though it was not apparent that students were solving problems or preparing information for "real" audiences, several teachers linked the activities and processes taking place within the classroom to "real world" questions or human conditions (CON, CR).

- Several teachers also shared specific feedback with students with regard to how they could improve their work. Often times, this feedback was accompanied by an acknowledgement of what students did well in communicating their understanding of concepts or skills (ExRS, MI).

- In two classrooms, teachers acknowledged the funds of knowledge students and their communities contributed to the classroom by acknowledging a student's way of defining a word (while also encouraging him to broaden his definition by incorporating recently taught concepts) and displaying a bulletin board of student-shared every day, "extraordinary people" (BC).

- Teachers demonstrated learning as a communal process in various ways, including discovering new words with students, using first person plural language (i.e. "we" and "us"), talking through complex problems together, and enacting creative strategies for holding individual students accountable to the class (ExRS, MI).

- While a few classrooms contained posters and quotes featuring African Americans and/or other people of color, many did not. Additionally, a few classrooms contained posters detailing the key aspects or the history of a discipline with illustrations of only Caucasian males. Most common was for classrooms to contain posters with words of general encouragement for students to engage in the learning process.

Below, I will go into greater depth about the roles the classroom practices and thought processes of teachers and administrators who I observed and interviewed played in my analysis process.

Roles of Teachers: Primary and Secondary Informants in the Data Analysis Process

To more efficiently manage the data and to begin to identify patterns among teachers, I organized my informants into different "roles" within my data analysis process. I began my intensive analysis by focusing on three teachers 1) who had been recommended by several colleagues and/or administrators, 2) who expressed an eagerness to participate for the opportunity to reflect upon and improve educational practice, 3) whom I had observed, and/or 4) who represented a variety of different academic disciplines., Thus, I treated the data collected from Brandon Davis, Felicia Nelson and Danielle Johnson as primary sources for identifying patterns. For each of the three teachers, I focused my analysis on observational data collected during at least four class sessions, seeking to capture both variety and continuity in lessons by considering different units (Danielle Johnson) and or different subjects taught by the same teacher (as in the cases of Felicia Nelson and Brandon Davis). Additionally, interview and/or observation data collected from Timothy Hughes (school administrator), Crystal Adams, Stephen Cullen, Elaine Hansberry and Elliot Steptoe served as my secondary sources, adding to my understanding of the setting and providing contrasting and confirming examples and/or serving as catalysts for identifying additions to the patterns and themes identified through consulting data from the three primary informants. This combination of administrators and teachers, together served as my primary and secondary informants.

Together with classroom visits, a whole school walk through and material artifacts, the information gathered from the collection of observations and interviews provided insight for considering the following questions: 1) In what ways were relevance and care enacted by teachers with reputations for effectively engaging African American students at Joseph N. Weaver High School? and 2) In what ways did the classroom practices of teachers at JWHS

mirror a framework for conceptualizing relevance and care as catalysts for supporting African

American students in assuming roles as learners? In the section below, I will address the first

question, the broader of the two, by detailing five themes that emerged as patterns among teacher

practices, while summarizing the ways that teacher practices mirrored my conceptual framework

directly after.

Teacher Practices in Relevance and Care: Emergent Themes and Patterns

While the conceptual framework and data collection tools created for this project provided focus

for what to look for in terms of relevance and care at JWHS, I was also mindful of patterns that

emerged from the collective practices and ways of thinking of teacher and administrator

participants. Five themes emerged: 1) Community-building, 2) Narrative Construction, 3)

Student Voice, 4) Race and Culturally Diverse Experiences and Perspectives, and 5) Trust,

Accessibility, Time and Attention.

Community-Building

Community through "We" and "Us" Language and Teacher Participation in the Classroom

When explaining classroom activities or concepts within a lesson, teachers often used a

combination of second-person and first person plural pronouns, suggesting that they were

engaged in relationships and processes *with* students.

Brandon Davis demonstrated this as he addressed a "matter of importance" with students

about something he observed in their interactions with each other. Waiting until the bell had rung

and all students were settled in their seats he said, "…I heard some conversations that I

disapproved of…when you are person of character, you want to have conversations that [lift each

other up]…especially for us, we're building a community…reconsider what you say and how

you say…be careful with the words you choose...thank you guys" (Observation #BD0329-2B, p.

53). As Davis shared his disapproval, he instructed his students regarding the types of conversations they should have on the basis of character and the community that he and the students were working together to build. This type of language was common among teachers, and suggested that, while embracing the responsibilities of an authoritative relationship as their teachers, they also assumed roles as colleagues and fellow community members.

Teachers also assumed similar roles as fellow learners through participating in exercises with or at the same time as students. As students wrote responses to writing prompts, Danielle Johnson often sat on a stool in the front of the class and responded to the prompt in her own composition book (Observation #DJ0203, DJ0204, DJ0314). Additionally, in approaching a new unit she decided to read the book for the first time along *with* her students. About the experience of reading the book at the same time as her class, she remarked,

> It's a different experience because I am reading about these characters right as they are, so my reactions and my responses are a lot more raw, and that matches them. We can have some really good talks about that, and they know I hadn't read it before, so we can have good talks about that, too. They can come in and say, "What did you think about this chapter? This thing that happened?" (D. Johnson, Interview, March 30, 2016).

Ms. Johnson acknowledged that having read the text for the first time alongside students allowed her to have an experience of encountering it more in step with theirs. Similar to the buzz after watching the most current episode of a popular television drama, she also suggested that approaching the unit in this way created space for great conversations and a common experience between her and her students as they all processed the text together.

Felicia Nelson read aloud with her students, as they learned about human trafficking through the memoir of a young woman of color who lived as a preteen slave in the United States.

With their seats oriented to form a triangle, Ms. Nelson instructed the boys to take turns picking up reading aloud when she said, "jump-in." "Let me tell you why I need you to jump-in," Ms. Nelson said, "I want you to read it like a child trying to tell you something…" Brightening the lights in the classroom, she described the narrator as a primary source and posed a question to the two male students regarding what the young narrator may have been thinking about where she was. After checking on her sophomore students, Ms. Nelson shared, "When I read chapter one, I get sad, but I know why she made it…Everybody doesn't make it, but I know why she made it." Ms. Nelson took turns reading with the two students. She read expressively. Her students read along silently, one occasionally looking up at her. "Jump in," she said, and one of the students picked up reading aloud (Observation #FN0204-A, p. 1).

As Ms. Nelson and the ninth grade students in this example took turns reading aloud, the boys, who participated in extracurricular activities outside of class together, engaged from time to time in quiet laughter. "What do y'all got about these feet," asked Ms. Nelson. "Feet make y'all laugh," she said, as the boys chuckled. As she started to read again about an unintentional amputation, the boys held back laughter. Ms. Nelson looked, briefly, back at me and said to me and the boys, "Y'all, I'mma tell you that, if my toes fall off, I'm not walking around to pick up my toes," she says, with a light and slightly humorous tone, contrasting her hypothetical response to the experience of the narrator (Observation #FN0204-A, p. 3).

Rather than reprimanding the boys or interpreting their laughter as a disrespectful response to the situation described in the text, Ms. Nelson responded lightly and with humor, communicating how her response would be different from that of the narrator and moves on with reading the text. Ms. Nelson paused after having read "no anesthesia" in the text to ask her

students what that meant. One says, "Umf," after she confirmed that his answer of "no painkiller," was correct (Observation #FN0204-A, p. 3).

At a later date, one of the ninth grade boys asked if, instead of reading silently, they could read another chapter in the memoir aloud again (Observation #FN0225-A, p. 30). The combination of reading, hearing and relating to the memoir together, Ms. Nelson's light and quick treatment of their laughter, and her strategic questioning, allowed the boys to consider the concept of human trafficking in a light atmosphere, but with sobriety to the experiences of the author.

Community through Student Agency: Opportunities to Contribute to Each Other and the Community

Teachers often built in opportunities for students to instruct each other academically and to assume different roles within smaller groups or the class as a whole. Examples included students working in small groups to complete labs as science research "colleagues" (Observation #BD0329-B), students offering suggestions after allowing their peers to talk through challenging content (Observation #FN0209-A) and students choosing topics and leading their peers in Socratic discussions (Observation #DJ0204) or reflective writing prompt (Observation #DJ0314).

While sometimes seeming to overflow in part from the academic leadership and support relationships teachers cultivated among students, some teachers also created space for students to provide affective support to each other.

Researcher: …I've noticed that there are times when you may ask students if they're okay, or, for example when the young female student, she was reading the poem about

depression, and you asked her questions about how she felt. How do you decide when to

dig a little bit deeper, and when to-...

Ms. Hansberry: I think I gauge what the other kids are feeling, because I could see that

everybody was really feeling for her, and that they were going to be tender to her.

I thought it was okay if she broke down, because sometimes kids really do need to break

down, and that girl specifically I know her well…She's a very talented singer and dancer,

she just doesn't have any confidence right now, which is very common in ninth-grade

girls. It's the worst time. Ninth-grade girls, it's just terrible. They're just still finding

themselves…" (E. Hansberry, Interview, March 31, 2016).

In this situation, the teacher expressed knowing the individual student and her class well enough

to decide that it was safe and beneficial for them to engage in the process of listening to and

comforting an African American female student who had just shared a poem about her

experiences with depression.

In addition to providing academic and affective support within the classroom, other

teachers also designed opportunities for students to share their knowledge and experiences with

the broader local community. Such opportunities were also characterized by inclusion of the

perspectives, contributions and experiences of diverse cultures and, at times, accounts of

resilience through considerable challenges. In one example, Felicia Nelson assisted students in

formally preparing to extend their relationships into a nearby neighborhood. For several class

periods, her tenth grade students had engaged in a study of segregation, integration and one of

the first schools for African Americans after the abolition of slavery. Their studies included

reading a book about and delivering speeches as members of the Little Rock Nine. Ms. Nelson

planned to organize an event where students would be able to not only ask questions of local

seniors who experienced integration firsthand, but to also sit on a panel and allow seniors to ask

them questions about their experiences in school.

> Felicia Nelson: I don't think the generation that went through integration understands
>
> education today. You constantly hear people my age and above, 50 and older say things
>
> like, "What else kids learning? They cannot tell you anything, they don't memorize
>
> anything and everything." They don't understand that they are another generation that's
>
> going to access information in order to be good at their jobs….Maybe somewhere there
>
> [will] be a chance to reconnect the past with the present with a better understanding of
>
> how students learn today, how they are today and how they are progressing…We want an
>
> exchange and then my challenge to the [senior community members] would be to ask
>
> questions of them that challenge them to answer them about what school is like
>
> today…(F. Nelson, Interview, March 15, 2016).

Ms. Nelson's plans to have her students share their schooling experiences with senior community

members suggested that even as students and learners they had something worthwhile to

contribute to not only the members of their community, but also the oral history of education in

the locale.

Constructing Narratives

A common theme throughout several teacher observations and interviews was the desire

to help students situate classroom concepts into a larger storyline (B. Davis, Interview, March

30, 2016; D. Johnson, Interview, March 3, 2016; E. Steptoe, Interview, April 1, 2016). Teachers

employed several techniques along such lines, including using questioning, storytelling,

metaphors and simulations to provide context for the content and skills they were exploring with

students.

Questioning and Inquiry

Frequently, teachers employed questioning in their instruction as a strategy to contribute to students' knowledge construction processes. Teachers used questions in several different ways. In some cases, questioning seemed to be a back and forth exchange used to help students draw out and add to their understanding of concepts and processes. As she works on answering questions accompanying a group lab replicating Koch's postulate for identifying the cause of disease, Brandon Davis questioned an African American female.

"So how would you know that cancer cells are responsible for cancers…,"he asks her.

"…It's not contagious…," she replies.

"It's not contagious," he affirms.

"So, you would want to do a biopsy and compare it…," she shares.

"Compare it to what...," he asks.

She answers and Mr. Davis affirms and elaborates upon her answer (Observation #BD0330-B, p. 58)

As the two continued the exchange, with Mr. Davis' guided questions, the student eventually identified limitations regarding the use of Koch's methods. As the class reconvened as a whole group, the same African American female student confidently shared as Mr. Davis selected her to share with the class why she believed there to be sufficient evidence to support a particular conclusion from the lab (Observation #BD0330-B, p. 58). In this case, rather than giving the student the answer, Mr. Davis used questioning to help her to draw upon her own store of knowledge to draft a logical train of thought that *potentially* contributed to her confidence in sharing with the whole class.

Questions were also employed in ways that created intrigue and introduced and highlighted pertinent concepts and principles. Over the course of several class periods, Ms. Nelson showed her ethnically and linguistically diverse geography class parts of a popular, historical fiction movie. Introducing the film, she asked, "What makes this movie [great or interesting]?" Ms. Nelson continued that there are questions and major themes it explored. "What happens when someone stronger than you [takes you away and drives you into slavery]? What happens when a man and a woman have loved each other all their lives...What happens when you don't know where you are on earth...what tools do you use? …Now, I think I am very tempted to play the first day in English and the second day in Spanish…because I think that it would be interesting and fair" (Observation #FN0314-B). This teacher used movies to help students build connections between geography and concepts they value and to which they can relate. Her use of questions introduced students to big ideas related to geography and the movement of people, while also offering students something to look forward to as they learn.

Questioning was also used as a strategy for encouraging students to reflect on their experiences, opinions and future aspirations. As if it is part of her lecture on Manifest Destiny, Ms. Nelson asked her geography students, "What's your destiny?" "Not to die tomorrow," said one student. "To help my family out," replied another African American male. "How many of you believe you will go to college," asked Ms. Nelson. Several, students raised their hands. "How many of you want to leave [graduate and get a good job]," she asked. Other students raised their hands. "How many of you...your good job is a hair dresser, mechanic...," she asks. Several students raised their hands. "And, we need all of those...we need all of you [to think about your destiny]," said Ms. Nelson before moving on (Observation #FN0225-B). In this conversation, Ms. Nelson validated the desired future roles of most, if not all of her class, by including several

possible postsecondary paths in her questioning. In the process of giving students a minute to

reflect on their postsecondary goals, and using the phrase "we need all of you…," Ms. Nelson

suggested a sense of belongingness, value and impact of students' desired future roles on a larger

community.

Metaphors and Simulation

Another teacher expressed how he used metaphors and simulations as ways of putting

challenging ideas within the context of a story. Describing how he used relevant explanations to

help students to make sense of documents and the need for continual skill development, Elliot

Steptoe explained,

> I try and use examples and metaphors that they can connect with. One way ... This is just
>
> sticking out because this is one way. I had a student that asked me, as far as going back,
>
> he's like, "Why are we going over this basic stuff that we already know? This is just a
>
> waste of time. This is stupid. Why aren't we worrying about something else?" I said, "It's
>
> just like learning to play basketball. You have to learn how to dribble. You learn how to
>
> dribble first. And you learn to pass and shoot and run plays and all this other stuff, but
>
> just because you're now running plays and learning how to shoot a 3 doesn't mean you
>
> don't go back and dribble."
>
> I noticed there's a couple of kids playing basketball who are like, "That's what we're
>
> doing?" They were like, "Oh yeah. I practice my dribbling every day. It's the most basic
>
> skill, but you have to continue to use it so that you use it to create other things. Your
>
> dribbling helps you create a shot. It helps you get other people open. It helps you move
>
> the ball. It opens up so many other things, and it's just one teeny tiny little part of

basketball." You're like, "Wow, I didn't even think about that." Just trying to use

metaphors that are relevant to certain people or hopefully multiple people.

In his explanation to students, Mr. Steptoe used a common student interest to explain the

constant practice of "basic stuff" as not only leading to the mastery of isolated skills, but, when

combined with other learning, also creating the capacity to solve intricate problems and develop

new systems.

Mr. Steptoe also described how simulations provided an entryway for helping his

students understand historical events, movements and eras. He explained,

> I think metaphors really help, and simulations, like I was talking about, going through an
>
> experience together, doing things together and understanding. We've done a few different
>
> experiments and experiences (E. Steptoe, Interview, April 1, 2016).
>
> One thing that I hope really helps them understand is we did this. We did it for civil
>
> rights and segregation and also for apartheid in geography. We had this apartheid
>
> simulation where 85% of the class was on 12% of the land. They were all in the back of
>
> the class, all together trying to take notes on the video that they could kind of hear, could
>
> kind of see, then there was a few people in the front that had most of the land. They could
>
> order them around to do whatever. Through that experience ... They picked random cards.
>
> Whoever got the royal cards just happened to be in charge. It allowed them to go through
>
> this unfair process where ... We could read about it all day. We could read about
>
> Mandela, and we could read about apartheid. They're like, "Yeah, this is stupid. This is
>
> boring," but actually being behind that line and having to have a pass book with them,
>
> when some of them went to the bathroom without it and then got put in jail, they're like,
>
> "That wasn't fair. That's stupid." I had people back here talking and getting angry. I'm

like, "*That's* how it feels when people are not treated right. Do you see the anger that you

have?" It connects to them. I think those experiences help everybody in the class to

understand, not just the people that need the visual or the people that need the experience.

It ties a bunch of things together so that when we go back to the conclusion or when we

come back, everybody has an understanding, [like], "I remember those people. Those are

the people that ...," whatever the case is.

By implementing activities that encouraged students to "step into the shoes" of historical

groups of people, he provided space for all of his students to consider concepts that could

otherwise feel distant, unapproachable or polarizing. Through participating in this and other

simulations, students had opportunities to empathize with the struggles of others and consider the

factors that influence the ways people interact with each other, the causes they take up, and the

ways they acquire and allocate resources and land. In this way, the facts of the history and

geography they studied had the potential to be enlivened by the narratives created during their

own role play. Additionally, Mr. Steptoe's focus on his students participating in simulations

"together" may have also created opportunities for his class to continually evolve as a

community.

Constructing Alternative Narratives as Identity Practice

Another facet of the concept of constructing narratives emerged as several teachers

expressed a desire to expose students to multiple or alternative narratives related to what it

means to be African American. Considering her ideal curriculum for African American students,

Danielle Johnson reflected,

If I were only considering African American students, my ideal curriculum would include

just far more African American authors, from a variety of places because a lot of our

African American students have a variety of cultural identities…. Just capture all of the different experiences that one can have when African American. It's not a single story, that that is the danger, right? You say, "This is *'To Kill a Mockingbird.* This is the experience for African Americans in America." Just a single story, of like poor, Black Tom Robinson who's accused of a crime he didn't commit, is convicted, is executed, essentially, that's the single story….but if we keep giving them the same literature, then we're telling them, as teachers, this is the experience of an African American. A lot of students would hear that and say, "It's not my experience" (D. Johnson, Interview, March 30, 2016).

Reflecting even on some of her own instructional choices, this teacher described her concern for students not gaining exposure to multiple accounts representing the experiences of African American.

Felicia Nelson also described her concern for equipping students with an alternately themed story and as a major motivation for planning their trip into the community. She explained,

…These students will be doing state and US history next year. They are going to go right into their class and they're going to be slaves. You're going to begin with America's history 1619, blah-blah-blah, 13 colonies, la-la-la and I want them to have a bigger picture of what does that look like. My goal was to reconnect them in a way where you don't just jump into a classroom and understand the group right here (F. Nelson, Interview, March 15, 2016.).

Specifically describing what he perceived to be one of the most important skills for helping students to critically navigate information sources, Elliot Steptoe shared the importance of helping all students to consider multiple perspectives of the same event,

Perspective is probably one of the biggest ones. I made an argument the other day trying

to help some people understand ... Once again we were talking about [a confederate]

statue and somebody said, "Well, you know, Martin Luther King is everywhere." They

were like, "He fought for civil rights. He's a civil rights activist." I challenged a couple of

people to think about Robert E. Lee. He was fighting for his civil rights too, his right to

property. You're like, "Well, that's completely different," but when you think about it

under the time and under the context, that is very much what Southerners felt. They felt

that their economy, their property had been taken away so they weren't able to produce

and create their livelihood. For them to be able to understand that perspective is key

really helps them. I think it helps African American students because they constantly get

a different perspective…I try and introduce a lot of different perspectives and a lot of

different ideas so that they can understand that there's validity in a lot of them, if not all

of them, to certain groups, to certain sides, to certain days and times ... Something that's

valid today may not be valid tomorrow ... And to understand that it can change, like I was

saying, and that it doesn't have to be the way that they take it in. Just because one person

believes this doesn't mean you have to believe it or it doesn't mean that it can't shape your

opinion. If John makes an excellent point, I'm like, "Well dang John, I'm going to have to

keep that in the back of my mind." Maybe I'll shift my opinion to strengthen it, to change

it a little bit, whatever the case may be… (E. Steptoe, Interview, April 1, 2016).

An African American male, Elliot Steptoe later discussed his own struggles to not give

into a "paranoia" regarding race as he teaches his classes. His comments suggested that

introducing students to multiple perspectives and encouraging them to listen well to other people

served a number of different functions in helping them to consider alternative narratives to the

ones they might be most likely (or most likely expected) to adopt for themselves and others. Not only did he discuss encouraging students to critically consider their own perspectives and the labels that are sometimes quickly and defensively assigned to others, but he also suggested communicating to students that perspectives can evolve over time.

Student Voice in the Classroom and Beyond

In addition to community-building and constructing narratives, another common theme that arose from observations in classes and conversations with teachers was the classroom being a setting for students to have voice and as a preparatory grounds for students to express their voices in other settings. The concept of "voice" is used here to not only describe the idea of verbally "speaking up," but also a sense that students can act in a way that influences change. In interviews, teachers spoke about "voice" in different contexts and different ways.

Danielle Johnson provided opportunities for students to use their voices to contribute to class discussions regularly. For one unit, she planned a Socratic discussion as the final assessment, building in short lessons on topics like drafting good questions and quality responses and by having each student lead mini-Socratic discussions with smaller groups of peers in preparation for the larger one. She also built in ways for less vocal students to participate on the day of the assessment (Observation #DJ0204). Additionally, on an ongoing basis, students took turns presenting to their peers the topic for their daily writing assignments (Observation #0314; Observation #0321). As part of another unit highlighting a novel by an African American author, Ms. Johnson provided students with a pros and cons list related to capital punishment, a sentence faced by a main character in the book. She expressed wanting to empower students to think through their personal opinions on capital punishment and to write a letter to their senator to communicate how they felt (Observation #DJ0314, p. 51).

Suggesting that the preparation that students were presently undergoing might equip them to one day reassure others, Mr. Davis responded to a student's question regarding why people wait until their health conditions have become bad to seek medical care. While acknowledging that sometimes people ignore their health, he answered his student, saying, "as future physicians," they have the opportunity to make medical care "less scary," to restore people's confidence that they "will not be completely broken" by a corrupt system and to "revolutionize" people's interactions with medicine (Observation #0330, p. 60).

Felicia Nelson described people as having multiple voices and suggested that students needed to be equipped to use all of their voices strategically so that all members of their audience could hear what they are saying. She detailed,

> You have your ethnic voice, and then you have your friend voice that's just you. That's that personal "Who you hang out with" voice. Then you have to have to me a professional voice that's both school and as you transcend into college or into the work world or transcend into your career. Whichever that is, we have more than 1 voice. My thing is let's strengthen our voice, we can enjoy it all. Use all your voices. When it comes to the classroom, what I'm trying to teach students is that you have to understand that your voice has to register with everyone. To register with everyone you have to be able to communicate in a way that is clear to everyone in the room. What does that look like? How does that feel? It begins with your posture, tongue twisters, it begins with how you pronounce words and get them out of your mouth and make sure that people really do understand what you are saying. Make sure that you are clear with how you are saying. That this does not mean you lose your culture. This just means that you refine yourself for the places that your voice is going to take you. Let's refine ourselves. In public

speaking you get all that; stand up sort of posture. Be able to look across the room. Be

able to direct your voice. Be able to know how to change your voice. Be able to use your

voice both culturally and otherwise for the professional world. That both can be used in a

school setting but how you deliver that determines the outcome because you still have to

understand that your voice has to be understood. That's my big thing. The voice has to be

understood (F. Nelson, Interview, March 15, 2016).

In this way, Ms. Nelson referred to the importance of being equipped to engage in *style-switching*. She spoke of cultural differences in language norms and explained the power of voice

and the importance of it being understood. Strategies she described using included tongue

twisters, rhyming through rap or song, orally describing in one minute what it was like waking

up in the morning, presenting persuasive speeches. The communication preparation that Ms.

Nelson pursued with her students served several functions, among them being to add to their

stylistic toolbox of "voices" to use, to make decisions about what voice to use in having the goal

of communicating clearly with different audiences, to be confident when confronted with people

who may invalidate their contribution, and to potentially defend their voice if and when

invalidated. Additionally, Ms. Nelson spoke of training students to share their needs with parents

and to clearly, respectfully and persistently communicate their needs with other teachers (F.

Nelson, Interview, March 15, 2016).

Race and Culturally Diverse Experiences and Perspectives in the Classroom

Additionally, several interviewees either shared directly or alluded to gaps in relating to

the experiences of African American students. Some spoke of personal gaps, while others shared

more broadly about a state between teachers and students. Timothy Hughes, a school

administrator described it broadly, sharing,

At the end of the day…a majority of the people who are teaching don't have a frame of

reference for African-American history, or how to teach it or build relationships with

African-Americans. Some of that, I think, got lost with schools being integrated... No one

has been able to figure out how to make people be interested enough in another ethnic

group and teach children about those groups. They don't do for African-Americans, it's

not done for Latinos, it's not done for the Asian ... I think some of it's gotten lost because

many of the people who are standing in front of your children are not people who have

any frame of reference for the African-American child.

Timothy Hughes seemed to connect teaching and relationship building. Further, he linked

the possession of a "frame of reference" for the two processes to having a genuine interest in

learning and teaching more about other ethnic groups to ones students. In some cases, teachers

described not being able to know what it was like to be an African American. For teachers who

mentioned this, their lack of understanding seemed to be an important personal

acknowledgement that also influenced the way they approached connecting and relating to their

African American students (E. Hansberry, Interview, March 31, 2016; D. Johnson, Interview,

March 3, 2016; B. Davis, Interview, March 30, 2016). For several teachers, getting to know their

students, along with learning from colleagues and friends, served as means for them to better

understand and/or appreciate the potential experiences and cultural backgrounds of other African

American students (E. Hansberry, Interview, March 31, 2016; D. Johnson, Interview, March 3,

2016; E. Steptoe, Interview, April 1, 2016). Though virtually all participants interviewed across

disciplines affirmed the importance of African American students seeing people and hearing

stories that reflected cultural backgrounds and experiences to which they could personally relate,

observations of teachers suggested a variety in how and the extent to which teachers incorporated them into their lessons.

Interestingly, the teachers who specifically either provided opportunities for students to experience and/or discuss diverse cultural contributions and perspectives within the classroom and/or who discussed having desires specifically (though not exclusively) for their African American students, tended to be those who also identified specific personal experiences related to race during interviews. Danielle Johnson collaborated with another teacher to implement a unit giving students practice using nonfiction texts and addressing controversial issues such as race, poverty, capital punishment and education. She guided students in exploring the concepts through reading a novel by an African American author (D. Johnson, Interview, March 30, 2016; Observation #DJ0314, p. 47). Additionally, motivated by a college essay written by a former student, she was cautious to maintain and communicate high expectations for her current African American students (Interview, March 3, 2016).

In addition to drawing upon community funds of knowledge by having AVID students engage in community research and interviews within a once predominately African American community (F. Nelson, Interview, March 15, 2016; Observation #FN0204-A), Felicia Nelson consistently made references to the strengths of historic groups of color, describing the Aztecs as a great civilization and as "beautiful, wonderful, intelligent people with language and…" (Observation #FN0224-B, p. 3) and Africans who became slaves with regard to their resilience and understanding of heat and rice (Observation #FN0224-B, p. 4). She also briefly explored with students the evolution of soca music, a merging of several different cultures originating in the Caribbean, through audio and video clips. Continuing to answer the question, "What happens when cultures collide," she briefly discussed the "kookiness" and potentially offensive use of the

music in a popular 90's film, *Beetlejuice*, and encouraged students that the movie may be worth "investigating" (Observation #FN0225, pp.14-15). Annually, Elaine Hansberry chose contemporary plays that would specifically attract African American and Latino students to serve as the school's feature production (E. Hansberry, Interview, March 31, 2016). Additionally, under her guidance, her diverse class of students wrote, practiced and performed poems, skits and songs related to issues of interest to them, including body image, immigration and politics, racial and regional stereotypes and depression (Observation #EH0324). Explaining how the project developed, Ms. Hansberry described,

> We read a lot of short pieces, like very, very short pieces, and we had a lot of really great discussions, and little practice sessions on satire, and on how you can say something, like all the different ways that you can say something important to you. …Then the kids, then the Black kids learn, when they learn history, did you see our piece called [title of student composition]? That came right out of our class discussions, because a kid said, it was at the beginning of February, and a kid said, "Oh how come we don't do anything for Black history?" I said, "Well that's a really good question"…Yes, class discussions about, sometimes I'll show them a little clip of a comedy sketch, or we watched a lot of slam poetry. We talked about things like body issue, body image. We talked about why white upper-middle class girls have body issues that are different from African-American girls, why there's a lower incidence of anorexia in the African-American community. We talked about standards of beauty, and that's where *[title of student work related to race and standards of beauty]* all came up too…so we broke up into groups, we talked about what you want to work on, like, "Who's interested in mental illness? Who's interested in sexism? Who's interested in racism?" We broke out into groups and then they were able

to write things by themselves, but they had to have a partner to bounce ideas off of…" (E.

Hansberry, Interview, March 31, 2016)

She created a space for students to critically examine issues that were of interest to them,

provided guidance for understanding and using techniques such as satire, encouraged them to

work with peers to develop pieces that reflected their discussions and specific interests, and

facilitated opportunities for them to provide each other feedback regarding how they could

perform in a way that illustrated the sentiments their words suggested (E. Hansberry, Interview,

March 31, 2016; Observation #EH0324).

Trust, Time, Accessibility and Attention

Finally, teachers often spoke of the importance of building trusting relationships with

their students. Danielle Johnson shared about the difficulty and worthwhileness of building a

relationship with an African American female whom she eventually recommended for honors

English. It is unclear as to whether or not Ms. Johnson's perseverance in investing in the

relationship with her student contributed to her adeptness in seeing the student's potential for

advanced coursework, or whether or not it in some way contributed to the student demonstrating

her potential more vividly. However, Ms. Johnson expressed that, through the difficulty of their

dynamic, she became more cognizant of how her personal experiences as a Caucasian female

differed from those of her student. Additionally, she became more aware that being African

American was a more central facet of identity for some African American students. Eventually,

Ms. Johnson had a conversation with the student to let her know why she was recommending her

for advanced coursework. The student eventually enrolled and participated in honors-level

English the next year (D. Johnson, Interview, March 3, 2016).

Likewise, Elaine Hansberry described a similar sense of the time necessary to build

trusting relationships with students. She shared about one particular African American female

student placed in her drama class who decided to stay despite originally expressing an intent to

quit on the first day. Ms. Hansberry seemed to successfully create a space in which most, if not

all, students felt comfortable candidly expressing themselves, but also offering constructive

feedback and emotional support to each other. Felicia Nelson described time spent conferencing

with students as something that contributed to the cultivation of trust between her and her

students as well as their allowing her to be authentic as a teacher. When asked how she

responded when students are doing poorly, she responded,

> I always have conferences. I meet with my students. I'll say, today, we're going to
>
> organize our folder. While we're organizing, I would like you all to work on your map
>
> assignment. I need 30 minutes of quiet time. You may listen to your music. Keep your
>
> voices way down, and you may point to people, things on the map and work with a
>
> partner, but I am going to conference. I bring them to me to sit beside me, and either they
>
> can pull up their grades, I'm making them more accountable, pull up your grades on your
>
> phone or your laptop, and let's look at the grade. Now look at what's missing and where
>
> your struggle is…Then when you make a plan with me, you have to follow through, I'm
>
> trusting you to do what you say. If we're going to stay over on a Wednesday, and I'm
>
> going to help a number of kids, I don't help just one…"Too much is missing. Going to
>
> call your parent, going to tell them I'd like you to come on a Wednesday afternoon. Do
>
> you think that's possible?"…Those are my techniques, and that's what I feel is of great
>
> value… (F. Nelson, Interview, March 25, 2016).

These and other teachers devoted time to several individual, face-to-face conversations, with students in their classes. They did so during formal class assignments as well as through brief, informal conversations. The content of their feedback also varied, sometimes providing specific ways in which students could improve their performance on class exercises and tasks, at other times trying to learn more about the situations and/or emotions behind students' responses, and still other times recognizing students' strengths and expressing vision and/or encouragement to them to not give up or try harder. Some teachers were also visibly accessible to students, often times taking initiative to reach out either in response to a student need or in anticipation of an opportunity to help. In Brandon Davis' case he consistently circulated the room, moving from group to group and asking questions about what students were finding during lab exercises or offering help by asking questions such as, "…can I help you guys with your collaboration?" (Observation #0322-A, p. 4; Observation #0325-B; Observation #0329-B). Danielle Johnson summed up her reasoning for taking time to personally hand back papers to students.

> I think that, if I can, and I can have a system that allows me to talk individually to a kid
>
> who failed a quiz, or has aced a quiz, or anywhere in between. If I can do that then I
>
> should because, on, simply throwing papers on student desks and having them look at the
>
> grades has not in my experience cultivated good personal relationship with the students
>
> or, more importantly, taught them the necessary skills they need to improve…Whereas if
>
> I am sitting there, and I can say, "this is what a, splice is," quickly show them. "Do you
>
> understand why you struggle with it? Okay, good. So we need to fix that," that
>
> conversation can happen in 20 seconds, and we've identified something they need to
>
> work on, they have a writing goal that is now specific in the attackable, and they feel

cared for by me. That I really do want them to prove their work, because I know they

can... I really want to communicate that to them (D. Johnson, Interview, March 30, 2016).

Teachers not only made themselves accessible to students, but also found ways to make

sure that items students needed to successfully complete their classroom tasks were available,

whether that meant presenting large-font, PowerPoint slides displayed on several computer

screens across the room (Observation #BD0329), loaning a book to a student who left his at

home (Observation #DJ0321, p. 57) or inviting a student with a cold to obtain a cough drop from

a communal classroom "hospitality" box (Observation #0225-A, p. 30).

Ms. Johnson and several other teachers expressed a sense of enjoyment in their students

trusting and feeling academically and/or affectively cared for by them. Often, teachers'

expressions of care included being proactively involved in their learning and accessible when

needed and offering access to the material resources that would help them to focus on their work

within the classroom.

Prevalence of Framework Categories and Recommendations for Moving Forward

All in all, I studied the educational practices and ideas of twenty teachers and one

administrator throughout the course of this project. Regarding stories, Gay (2010) reflects, "They

can entertain, educate, inform, evoke memories, showcase ethnic and cultural characteristics, and

illuminate abstractions" (p. 3). Up to this point, I have shared several vignettes, organized into

themes and patterns as I observed class sessions and conversed with administrative and teacher

participants. My hope was to first showcase some of the "cultural characteristics" of relevance

and care at Joseph N. Weaver High School among teachers who had reputations of doing a great

job engaging African American students. In this section, I will briefly describe the extent to

which the specific relevance and care framework strategies (*Appendix A*) were reflected in observations and interviews.

Prevalence of Framework Categories in Summary

The conceptual framework guiding this capstone project included six overarching categories of relevance and care. Relevance was considered with regard to how teachers pursued and considered 1) building connections (BC), 2) facilitating critical and reflective thinking (CR), and 3) providing opportunities and encouragement to make contributions within the classroom and broader communities (CON). I considered care for students specifically in terms of how teachers 1) communicated high expectations while offering rigor and academic and affective support (ExRS), 2) communicated and illuminated for students the malleability of intelligence (MI), and 3) communicated and demonstrated challenge and resilience as presenting opportunities for growth (CG).

Upon analyzing observation and interview data, a few categories resonated most among the practices and articulated thought processes of JWHS teacher participants. Among relevance categories, examples related to building connections (BC) were most common. Under the umbrella of building connections, I found similar numbers of instances connecting classroom content and experiences to diverse perspectives, experiences and contributions (BC-E), community funds of knowledge (BC-K), students' language practices (BC-L) and students' interests (BC-I), though I also included within that count ways that teachers seemed to be building connections, in ways that were unspecified by my framework. For example, during a biology lesson related to how plants responded to different stimuli, the teacher referenced trees at a local landmark saying, "*If you go [over] to [name of site], you may notice the mimosa leaves…,*" and described how the plants responded to touch (Observation #BD0322-1A). While

the teacher's example bridged the concepts of the lesson to the local environment, his reference to place did not draw connections in ways that reflected any of the specific subcategories underneath my *building connections* or *critical and reflective thinking* categories. Thus, I noted this example while coding the data, but designated it separately from others that more readily fit within my framework. I adopted this system of accounting for potential examples that extended outside of my original conception for all other framework categories as well. While I also observed and learned more from teachers about how they guided students through opportunities for critical and reflective thinking (CR) and making contributions (CON), I found these aspects of relevance to be less apparent among teachers than building connections (BC). With regard to care for students, I observed examples of teachers referencing or demonstrating high expectations and providing rigor and support (ExRS) to be much more prevalent than teacher comments or exercises that might indicate and/or promote a belief in the malleability of intelligence (MI) or that challenge and resilience present opportunities for growth (CG).

Arguably, of greater value than considering the number of times I observed different categories, was to consider patterns in the nature of their occurrences and potential gaps in their implementation. While I do not assume that my study represents the full spectrum of teacher practices at JWHS, the data collected provides great insight into how aspects of my framework are and are not reflected in the practices of teachers well-respected for their engagement of African American students and/or who were willing to allow me to reflect upon their classroom practices. Based on my study and a consideration of teaching as a constant learning process (Freire, 2009), I can confidently conclude that the teachers at JWHS represent a spectrum of readiness levels for creating experiences of relevance and care for their African American students and that there are several opportunities for growth even among the school's most

successful teachers. While I identified aspects of teacher attitudes and practices through observational and interview data that reflected elements of my framework, I also identified several gaps. Additionally, the concerns occasionally expressed by study participants and informal conversations among students also suggested that, just as there were teachers who excelled in some areas of relevance and care, there were also teachers who did not have the same degree of awareness or readiness. As a focus of this project was for analysis to contribute to improving educational praxis, I will identify some ways that teacher practices mirrored my framework, but draw special attention to potential gaps.

While Joseph N. Weaver High School faculty and administrators warmly welcomed me into their school community and, in many cases, their classes, the classroom practices and attitudes about teaching African American students seemed to vary with regard to comfort, preparation and implementation. Therefore, I have included several sample recommendations, at least one with regard for teachers who are just starting to explore strategies related to the category, and another for teachers who may be farther along and interested in continued growth in the category. Several recommendations stem from the research and education literature that inspired each framework section. I have included a more extensive list of recommendations in the handbook provided to the school.

Building Connections

Relevant curriculum and instruction for African American students connect content and skills to the people, cultures, places, languages, ideas and activities with which they identify, that have personal meaning to them and/or are of particular interest to them. Teachers miss out on opportunities to help their students to see themselves in the curriculum when they omit from their instruction the perspectives of communities of color, the funds of knowledge and language

practices students bring into the classroom and/or the topics, hobbies and issues that have captured their interests.

In teacher and administrator interviews, incorporating the perspectives, experiences or contributions of African Americans seemed to be the example of engaging curriculum and instruction that participants most readily identified. While classroom walls occasionally included a person of African descent among quotes and posters of other famous people, few, if any of the pictures of African Americans were also female. The extent to which teachers at JWHS drew connections between the curriculum and facets of diverse cultures varied. While some teachers deliberately incorporated the experiences and perspectives of African Americans and other people of color, there was little if any evidence of such in the instruction of others. I found this to be the case especially, though not exclusively, in STEM classes. There could be several reasons for the omission, including the perception of science as a discipline of universals that transcend the specifics of culture and race, as mentioned informally by one participant. Additionally, the importance of focusing on the specific needs of African American students as a cultural group could be overshadowed by perceptions of race as a primarily physical trait and the presence of social factors that seem more influential, such as the socioeconomic status of students. These perspectives are exhibited first as a teacher describes race as a "physical component" or "physical attribute," that isn't the forefront of my mind. What I see, to make a connection ... Obviously, being Caucasian, I can't change that. If I'm going to try to make a connection with a student, it can't be based upon that physical component. What it comes down to is cultural and social experiences that make the most difference. That is something where you can ... That's where the empathy comes from. That's where the connection between the teacher and the student

arises. We do. I think we're inclined to coalesce and get together with those individuals that are most like us. It's that whole idea of ethnocentrism. (Participant Interview)

The participant later added,

> If we're talking about addressing particular groups, for myself, for example, I don't think about it in terms of addressing African American students in general. Where I see a big issue, a big disconnect, often times, has to do with socioeconomic disparity. A lot of times, that correlates with African American students. When you look at at-risk students, at-risk youth, there's a certain overlap, for unfortunate reasons. That tends to happen. I guess that's where working with, if we talk about African American students. When you have an affluent person of any ethnic background, they tend to be very successful in classrooms, generally speaking. That seems to be a bigger split is the socioeconomic piece. For me, that's where I think my experiences play a big role in it. I did not grow up wealthy… (Participant Interview)

This teacher describes a preference for focusing on socioeconomic disparity and associates this with meeting the needs of at-risk youth. Despite acknowledging a correlation between socioeconomic disparity and race, the teacher sees socioeconomic status as a more accessible means of connecting his own experiences to the social grouping he prefers to address. The idea of connecting of identifying with students on the basis of low socioeconomic status was not unique to this teacher. Unfortunately, in this case, the misconceptions that affluence eliminates the challenges potentially brought about by racial differences and the perception of race as a solely physical attribute make considering curriculum that is responsive to the specific needs of African American students much less of a priority.

Aside from the example detailed above, teachers at JWHS built connections between students, the curriculum and discipline in different ways and to varying extents. Among teachers who deliberately incorporated the experiences and perspectives of African Americans and other people of color, efforts were characterized by focusing either on helping students to consider the strengths, perseverance and contributions of diverse people or to make sure students were aware of the reality and severity of issues related to race. One particular example in which a teacher focused on the latter illustrated the complexity of using a fictional text by an African American author as a means by which to explore issues of race, justice and punishment. "It's set in the 1930's and it's really about racism…," she explained to a Caucasian male student who had been absent when she first introduced the book several days before. While the plot of the book the teacher in this example described took place in a setting affected by racism, the major themes as described by the author included questions that were much more layered and universal to human interactions. I have shared only a brief excerpt, but it illustrates how the teacher continued to emphasize elements of the story that, though serious, arguably did not have the thematic primacy that they were presented to have. African American students, along with the rest of their classmates, seemed hesitant to participate in the classroom discussion or volunteer to read aloud nonfiction sources related to race relations. However, African American males in the class more readily contributed to the discussion when asked more general questions about what one of the African American protagonists may have been feeling at a particular point in the novel. The potential consequence of using the book as a platform to educate students about race and other controversial themes may have not only resulted in sacrificing deeper conversations with students about the nature of human relationships that could have eventually made contentious topics more approachable, but also the added consequence of communicating in an

oversimplified sense to students that the African American author wrote about racism. This

example suggests that some thoughtful and reflective teachers who may desire to incorporate

diverse voices into their curriculum, could benefit from additional training and support in how to

navigate such resources in ways that maintain the integrity and complexity of the author's

intended themes and explore challenging issues that shaped the backdrop, while providing a

more welcoming environment for African American (and non-African American) students to

both participate in class discussions and potentially gain additional inspiration for envisioning

themselves as writers.

While some teachers provided students with choices for topics to study or ways in which

to demonstrate their understanding of concepts or skills, there was very little evidence of

teachers inviting students to share their interests informally or through interest inventories.

During interviews, participants by-in-large identified sports and church as issues, interests and

values of importance to African American students. Furthermore, it was very rare that teacher

references to students' interests included topics outside of sports, fashion or dance, whether

during direct conversations with students or during semi-structured interviews. Teachers

mentioned church with students much less frequently. On one hand, that most, if not all teachers

would unknowingly agree in identifying sports and church as major parts of their African

American students' lives may likely suggest that the teachers are tuned in to two significant

interests that many of their students share. However, that sports and spirituality tend to be

stereotypically associated with African Americans could also suggest that identification of such

interests could either be assumptions or "low hanging fruit," as opposed to accurately identifying

a greater variety of interests, pertinent issues or values important to their students. There is not

enough evidence to support one interpretation over the other. Nevertheless, it would be

worthwhile for teachers to examine whether or not there are additional (and more specific) values, local and/or larger scale issues, and interests (including phenomena, curiosities, hobbies and academic topics) that captivate their African American students. Teachers may need to dig deeper to discover and consider students' interests that may be more extensive than the activities in which they participate. Additionally, probing into the reasons *why* students gravitate towards such interests may provide opportunities for the identification of intriguing principles and points of connection.

Some teachers expressed during interviews valuing the perspectives students contributed to the classroom. The way teachers described students' background knowledge ranged from finding it important to "celebrat[e] students' personal anecdotes" to students' personal experiences being essential to the nature of the discipline and structure of the classroom. While there was some evidence through displays of student work, I saw few examples of teachers connecting to students funds of knowledge during class sessions. Occasionally, teachers described ways they facilitated exchanges of knowledge and skills between students and community members, though this was uncommon. One teacher invited in a local artist to work with students in preparation for a community presentation and another teacher organized and prepared students for a field trip through which they would learn more about the history and evolution of a local neighborhood and its residents. However, I did not see any evidence of on-site parental participation in the classroom learning processes.

Participants occasionally and sometimes without prompting talked about the significance of parents in the lives of students. In one case, the school principal included in his description of teachers who are most effective engaging African American students, "Teachers who reach out to those students' families, and it gets back to the child that, 'Hey, your teacher called and said

that you were doing a great job,' or 'He just let me know what's going on in class.' That helps a

child feel as though the teacher cares" (Participant Interview). Though the principal shared that

parents were sometimes welcomed to serve as guest speakers in classrooms, I did not observe

any class sessions when parents of students visited. Altogether, teacher descriptions of parents of

African American students included them as living mostly in rural locales, being hardworking

and willing to contribute whatever they were able, and respecting when teachers reached out to

them and/or demonstrated a willingness to help their children. Based on data from participant

interviews, I deduced that there could be a number of reasons why occurrences of African

American parents serving as guests in the classroom may be infrequent. Possible reasons

included the nature and frequency of parent work obligations, a general decrease in all parental

involvement from elementary to high school, and/or parents targeting their involvement in

students' schooling towards volunteering time and preparing food for students' sporting and

extracurricular events. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that several comments related to rural

parents, however respectfully noted, implied limitations to what they were able to provide. With

no intentions of minimizing parents contributing in such ways, teachers should avoid a potential

deficit perspective by cautiously balancing an understanding for the values and economic

constraints that shape the ways that parents of rural African American students contribute with

continuing to consider ways they can share their personal funds of knowledge through the

conversations and learning processes taking place within the classroom.

Getting Started with Building Connections

Teachers should conduct an inventory of the posters, textbooks and other resources that

are visible and/or commonly used within their classrooms, with specific attention to resources

that perpetuate racial stereotypes for who are the significant faces, voices and/or contributors to

academic disciplines (to the exclusion of others). Teachers might consider removing or replacing such resources with ones that include more diverse representation.

Teachers might also consider working together to research ways their discipline has been influenced by African Americans and other diverse and traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups. Making use of resources available in the school, public library and local college or university resources, when possible, teachers might consider incorporating diverse primary sources in order to help students to explore the contributions of traditionally underrepresented voices and to introduce different perspectives into classroom discussions.

Moving Forward with Building Connections

As teachers expressed a concern for students having access to multiple narratives of what it means to be African American, when incorporating texts by diverse authors, teachers might consider balancing a focus on race with considering the universal themes around which authors and professionals have focused their work. For some African American students, discussing issues of race can be intimidating or invoke feelings of pressure to speak as a representative for an entire racial community. Devoting greater attention to universal themes or other aspects of authors' experiences can also serve as potential "entry points" for discussing more complex racial and social issues without detracting attention from other ways by which the author's work might connect to the experiences of students and their communities.

Critical and Reflective Thinking

African American students benefit from classroom learning experiences through which they practice critically and reflectively considering the 1) information sources to which they have access (Cortes, 2001; Gay, 2010; Loewen, 2010) and 2) the places within which they and others live (Azano, 2011; Banks, 2008). This may include guiding them through weighing the cultural

messages communicated through textbook content, media and their social interactions. It may

also involve teachers working with students to examine the features of the places within which

they live and the ways that their local, national and international contexts connect to their

academic subjects. Training students to be reflective and critical consumers of the cultural

messages they receive through mass media, textbooks and other information sources may assist

them in challenging stereotypes and reassessing the culturally congruent activities available to

them (Gay, 2010: Oyserman, 2013). Engaging with African American students in a reflective

and critical examination of place not only has the potential to connect the classroom curriculum

to students' local environments (Azano, 2014), but also to open opportunities for students to

consider the evolution of their communities (DeJesús & Antrop-Gonzaléz, 2006) and how they

can positively affect them (Azano, 2011).

Among teachers observed and interviewed, most expressed a desire for students to be

able to think about their opinions regarding locally, national or internationally pertinent issues

and/or to consider the characteristics and implications of societal systems, traditions and

structures. Collectively, teachers expressed the importance of students being able to identify

author biases, distinguish between prejudice and unawareness and to have access to alternate

narratives regarding who they are individually, as members of the African diaspora, and with

regard to the perspectives and opportunities available to them. Nevertheless, there was little

evidence to suggest that such skills were deliberately explore and cultivated in many classrooms

throughout the school.

There were few if any instances when classes distinguished between generalizations and

stereotypes and specifically challenged common media depictions of different groups of people,

and I only observed one class where students composed responses to ethnic and regional

stereotypes they had either experienced or about which they were aware.

Another example demonstrated an opportunity for critical reflection that stopped just

short of engaging students in discussion. As she and students look at a common illustration of the

concept of Manifest Destiny, the teacher shares with the class, "When we look at Manifest

Destiny, this is the picture they love to show…If you were to look at it, who is the most

important person in the picture…," asks the teacher. Students respond that it is the woman. The

teacher asks how they know. Later, after asking several questions about the picture and what it is

illustrating about the movement of people, she summarizes, "...They are saying the floating

White woman is going west...you all said that...and she represents America...[and all that

America wants].." (Observation #FN0225-2b). While this teacher frequently included statements

questioning the representations of different cultures and historical concepts in art and popular

culture as part of her lectures, I did not observe instances where students engaged in identifying,

weighing and measuring the generalizations, stereotypes and biased cultural messages they

encountered in the media and as part of their lessons. Observations such as the one above, did

not result in student discussions, but rather ended as brief lectures or references.

While not completely absent, teachers drawing deliberate connections between the

classroom content and the values, perspectives, traditions and/or evolution of trends of students'

local communities were infrequent. In one class, the teacher planned a walking tour of a local

community and prompted students to consider questions such as, "Do you think teens receive the

services that a multigenerational facility should provide," of a local site (Observation #FN0204-

1a). In depth explorations of the concept of "place" were uncommon outside of this specific

example, and almost exclusively occurring in elective courses. Despite a large percentage of

African Americans and the general school student body living in rural areas, integration of the characteristics and features of rural locales were even less frequent.

Getting Started with Critical and Reflective Thinking

Teachers might consider ways to deliberately present essential classroom curricula through the lens of students' local context. As a beginning step, this may include building in opportunities for students to explore in what ways their local contexts manifest or present contrasting examples in relation to required content. Manifesting itself in different ways for different disciplines, this may also include helping students to identify the physical, social, economic and/or environmental characteristics of their local environments.

Moving Forward with Critical and Reflective Thinking

To prepare students for navigating the cultural messages they receive on a daily basis through mass media, textbooks and social interactions, teachers might plan discussions and/or exercises to help students learn to distinguish between generalizations and stereotypes.

With regard for their areas of expertise teachers might also guide students in projects that encourage them to study the evolution of social, environmental, artistic, political and/or economic trends within their neighborhoods and/or locales over time. Teachers and students might consider how such changes may have been influenced by a broader state or national context or may reflect a similar evolution in other locations.

Making Contributions

Creating spaces for students to explore roles as important contributors to disciplinary discussions and potential agents of change has the potential to promote student growth and further prepare them to be well-informed, well-equipped citizens (Azano, 2011; Banks, 2008; Darling-Hammond, Williams & Hyler, 2007; Gay, 2010; Loewen, 2010). Engaging in learning

tasks that have particular pertinence to their lives or desired future roles *and* the class subject

additionally increases the likelihood that they will deem it important to continue exploring a

discipline (Anderson, 2007). Students additionally benefit from opportunities to address "real

world problems" and to produce goods, services and/or ideas for real audiences.

In some classes, teachers prompted students to consider the roles they could play within

different present-day and future contexts. Most times, this seemed to flow organically during

discussion of a particular topic or in response to a student question or conversation. Nevertheless,

in only one class did I observe a teacher who made consistent references to students' possible

future selves with specific links to the class' primary academic discipline. The teacher frequently

either referred to the students as scientists or linked the learning tasks and thought processes

within which students were engaging to the practices of scientists and researchers. Referring to

students as burgeoning experts or professionals within a discipline was not a widespread

practice.

Similarly, it was not at all common for classes to include deliberately planned

opportunities for students to apply what they were learning in authentic ways to produce goods,

services or information for real audiences. There were very few examples of teachers setting in

motion interactions that would allow students to respond to an identified opportunity, problem or

need using concepts and skills to be explored in class. Deliberately planned exchanges of that

sort were rare. Overall classes varied in the extent to which the descriptions and instructions

students received for learning tasks replicated real issues. In most classes, such links seemed to

more so serve in the same way as word problems: "set-ups," scenarios and opportunities to

imagine skills and concepts within a context, rather than leading to the production of knowledge,

goods and services that students could contribute to an identified community.

Among classes observed, it was more common for teachers to have built in opportunities for students to contribute to *each other's* learning within the classroom. In some cases, it was normal practice for students to contribute to their classmates by preparing and leading discussions on various topics, providing feedback to each other on their thinking and performance, and/or holding each other accountable for their behavior and/or task completion. In two particular instances, this seemed to be built into the structure of the class or to be a dynamic facilitated by the teacher, especially as teachers invited students to provide oral feedback or assistance to peers with topics, skill sets or ways of thinking with which students' felt confident. Nevertheless, classes varied in the extent to which teachers provided opportunities for students to take on a variety of roles among their peers. While some teachers built in opportunities for African American students to assume positions of leadership, support and of providing constructive feedback to their peers, it was more common to observe class time devoted to whole class, teacher lectures and/or teacher assigned, individual student work.

Getting Started with Opportunities to Contribute

Teachers may consider designing learning tasks that link what they desire students to know, understand and be able to do with the processes and habits of mind of professionals in related fields. Additionally, they might incorporate language that relates students and their classroom tasks to professionals and their practices. Teachers using phrases such as, "As a [scientist, mathematician, short story writer, etc.]…" in referring to students and as they are explaining assignments or answering related questions may inspire students to envision themselves in various possible future roles.

Moving Forward with Opportunities to Contribute

In planning a unit, teachers can link content goals to learning tasks that lead students towards thought processes and products with professional and/or real world pertinence. While considering such tasks, they might research and identify communities within or outside of the school who may have a genuine interest or need in what students can develop and contact the necessary colleagues or community members to facilitate the interaction. For students who are ready to do so, a teacher might also consider engaging students themselves in processes of identifying people, communities, and/or organizations with whom they would like to share and helping them to make arrangements to do so.

High Expectations, Rigor and Support

The extent to which they feel cared for can affect and influence students' responsiveness to classroom learning tasks and instructions (DeJesús & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006; Deutsch, 2008; Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004). Additionally, the quality and rigor of curriculum can be interpreted by students as indications of teacher respect and vision for their futures (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004). Students are more likely to confidently engage in classroom processes as learners when teachers combine high expectations with challenging learning tasks and academic and affective support.

My data suggested that several JWHS teachers and administrators desired that African American students experience a sense of value, investment in their potential and high expectations for their success in their own classrooms and the classrooms of their colleagues. A few teachers pursued such goals in varying ways, including deliberately examining the nature of feedback they offered students to guard against communicating low expectations, seeking ways to draw out and showcase students' talents, and deliberately training students with skills useful

for effectively communicating in different settings. Several teachers also expressed valuing being accessible to and gaining the confidence of their students. In at least one case, a teacher sought feedback from students at the end of the year to find out what would have helped her class to learn better and how she could have more effectively met their needs. There was little evidence that it was a common practice for teachers to gather such information from students on an ongoing basis to inform their curricular and instructional choices throughout the school year.

During the majority of classroom observations, there was little to no variability in the difficulty of learning tasks in which different students were engaged. Instead, teachers seemed to vary their instructional strategies on different days with the class as a whole and to rely on student choice to provide opportunities for students to pick assignment topics about which they were interested or with which they felt most comfortable. Additionally, there was little evidence of the use of preassessments as a way to gauge student readiness. Without differentiating learning tasks and applying methods for preassessing student understandings going into new lessons, it was highly unlikely that teachers were providing challenging learning opportunities for all of their students. Furthermore, while some teachers employed intriguing questions to envelope content, most classes made very few references to big ideas or overarching principles, thereby potentially missing out on opportunities to facilitate students connecting and recalling the details from a given lesson.

Within the school, there were a variety of different attitudes towards teaching African American students. Attitudes ranged from teachers enjoying opportunities to get to know their students and believing that curriculum should reflect their cultural backgrounds and personal interests to befuddlement and frustration with students not abiding by classroom norms and

interpretation of their behavior as a clear indication that they did not value learning. During an

interview, one teacher recalled,

 I wish you would have heard this interview, [my student, an African American male]

did this interview the other day… He said over and over, "We just want to be heard. We

want people to see what we have, and what we can share." It was so simple, and so well

stated. I'm really passionate about this, because just yesterday I just have to tell you, I

was working with [another] teacher, and most of my [participants] are African-American

this year… so I bring all these kids in there. They don't read music, but they are

extremely musical…They're a little bit boisterous and energetic, and they're laughing,

because this is all new to them. The two white males who were in charge yesterday were

coming down very hard on all of the kids, and everyone was really freaked out, and one

girl, [student name], an African-American girl, she left in tears, and so afterwards I talked

to these two men, and I said, "You have to understand kids' background of experience,

and where they're coming from before you speak to them …because we always have to

take into account how we're being perceived by an audience that isn't part of our cultural

experience." I said this to these two men, and what they were saying back to me was, "Oh

that's just an excuse. Everybody should be able to sit down," and they were doing the

whole "pull yourself up from your boot straps." "You have low expectations of them,"

and I said, "You're not understanding what I'm saying at all." The irony is, after

everything was over, after all of this stuff was over, my kids were the ones who stayed in

the room and [continued working and creating new products]. They were motivated to

keep on, but they just have a different way of learning… (Participant Interview)

Alarmingly, comments such as the one above expressed by participants suggested additional concerns, beyond the ones I heard directly, about colleagues perceiving some African American students as not valuing learning and/or African American students sometimes feeling as though their voices were not being heard.

Getting Started with High Expectations, Rigor and Support

Teachers should consider their expectations for African American students' interest in learning and potential for success, as well as the experiences that have shaped their ways of thinking. If not already reflective of their attitudes toward students, teachers might also consider how their expectations and instruction may evolve if they were to start with the assumption that every student desires to learn (something).

Teachers might also consider conducting preassessments at the beginning of lessons to assess student readiness and periodic surveys to ask students what instructional strategies have been useful in helping them to feel supported as learners.

Moving Forward with High Expectations, Rigor and Support

In addition to providing support in the form of scaffolding, teachers should also incorporate opportunities for African American and other students to pursue more challenging studies of concepts or skill sets within which they seem to thrive (or be) at a higher readiness level than their peers. Considering the challenges of class time and the variety of needs that may be present, this may entail building in meaningful tasks to which earlier finishers can return and opportunities for students to pursue deeper or more challenging studies when presented with skills or topics in which they have demonstrated great proficiency and/or interest.

Teachers should also pursue organizing classroom content to tell larger "stories," or to address "big ideas," larger principles or compelling questions. Introduce them at the beginning of

the units and lessons. Making them visible within the classroom, they should verbally remind students of the question(s) that are most pertinent at the beginning of each class period and return to the question(s) frequently. Teachers might also build in opportunities for students to reflect on how the specific content and skills they are practicing provide new information and/or tools for answering the questions.

Malleability of Intelligence

Dweck (2008) writes, "…when students understand that school is for them---a way for them to grow their minds---they do not sabotage themselves" (p. 201). When teachers believe in and help students cultivate an understanding of their intelligence as a trait that grows, it can positively affect student-teacher relationships as well as students' motivation, performance, and likelihood of making the most of feedback and existing supports (Dweck, 2008). Additionally, for African American students, belief in the malleability of intelligence can buffer the negative effects of involuntary student conformity to negative academic stereotypes (Aronson, Fried & Good).

In several classes observed, ongoing feedback and academic support seemed to be built into the structure of the class. The way in which these opportunities were structured varied, and included providing one-on one feedback about what students did well and what they would need to improve on shared during quiet, independent student work, working with students outside of normal class time to help them understand challenging concepts or skills and engaging the class in sharing critiques of student presentations. Classroom seating arrangements also varied and shifted. In many cases, groups of students working together on class assignments tended to be racially diverse, and, in most cases, students seemed to have assigned seats, most times chosen by the teacher. Whereas in some cases, grouping seemed to be based on which students worked

well together and how to meet the complexity of needs within the classroom, in several classes,

students had opportunities to interact with a variety of classmates through teachers employing

different grouping strategies for different tasks. Both the offering of practical feedback and

students having opportunities to work within various grouping arrangements have the potential to

communicate to students that their intelligence is fluid and not necessarily associated with a

stagnant level of ability or one particular group of peers.

      Nevertheless, despite displaying some attitudes and approaches to instruction that would

suggest a growth mindset towards students, there were several indications of orientations

towards fixed mindsets regarding students' academic abilities and the possibility of learning

various aspects of being an effective teacher. When asked about school mechanisms that

facilitate African American student participation in advanced level coursework, one teacher

commented,

> [The school principal] is a big advocate of pushing for students to take challenging
>
> classes. I think we just have a school culture where it's accepted that your honors or AP
>
> class is going to have a range of academic aptitudes. That's okay with us. We're providing
>
> an opportunity to all of us. (Participant Interview)

      Perhaps the most concerning aspect of the comment above is the link drawn between

facilitating African American student participation and being accepting of a "range of academic

aptitudes." Potentially embedded in the idea of perceiving a school culture that "provid[es] an

opportunity for all," is a stereotypical implication that African American students do not have an

academic ability on par with their peers. This would not only reflect a stereotypical perception of

African American ability, but this particular choice of words also implies a fixed sense of student

ability. More nuanced comments regarding students abilities included one participant expressing

doubts about all students being able to participate in higher order thinking and another sharing about having high, but different, expectations for all students.

In addition to potential indications of fixed mindset orientations towards student ability, there were also participant comments that suggested fixed mindsets towards teachers. Asked about characteristics of classrooms in which African American students tend to be engaged, a school administrator reflected,

> Teachers who take a genuine interest in the children. Teachers who make children feel important, and that they are a priority, and sometimes examples, simply asking them how they're doing, what do they need help with. Teachers who reach out to those students' families, and it gets back to the child that, "Hey, your teacher called and said that you were doing a great job," or "He just let me know what's going on in class." That helps a child feel as though the teacher cares. I think those are additional characteristics. Unfortunately, when you talk about home school relationship piece, what I just described are things, are traits that really have to be innate, like, you can't really [learn] in school… (Participant Interview)

The description of building relationships with parents as something innate and incapable of being taught suggests a fixed mindset towards inclinations and character traits that facilitate providing care for students. This idea of the innateness of qualities is also reflected in another teacher comment suggesting that some people are meant to be teachers and some not. Holding such a view of teachers, both at a peer and administrative level is deeply problematic because it has the potential to undermine any efforts to grow as a school towards more effective relevance and care practices.

Getting Started with Malleability of Intelligence

Teachers and administrators may consider reading Carol Dweck's *Mindset* and/or other literature related to the malleability of intelligence and take inventory of their beliefs regarding their students and themselves. Teachers may also consider reading *Whistling Vivaldi* by Claude Steele and/or other research about the prevalence and effects of stereotype threat and the potential of belief in the fluidity of intelligence to buffer its effects. They may also reflect upon how their practices as a teacher may demonstrate a fixed or fluidly oriented belief in the nature of intelligence.

Moving Forward with Malleability of Intelligence

Teachers may consider working *with* students to identify areas within which they have grown and to discuss goals and plans for continued learning.

Challenges, Resilience and Growth

Resilience is a fluid trait that can be cultivated and influenced by one's context (Olsson et al., 2003; Reis, Colbert & Hébert, 2004; Spencer et al., 2006). The presence of challenge has been linked to the cultivation of resilience (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella- Brodrick & Sawyer, 2003), and, when surveying the lives of creative geniuses, exceptional innovation and production has been associated with perseverance through obstacles (Dweck, 2002). Additionally, normalizing the idea of experiencing challenges and setbacks in pursuit of goals or desirable future identities has the potential to increase student motivation to pursue areas of personal interest (Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). Teachers can further demonstrate care for their African American students by presenting opportunities to explore the relationships between challenge, resilience and growth both within their own lives and as they explore the lives of others.

While posters related to not giving up were displayed on some classroom walls, oral references and discussions related to growth through experience of challenge and resilience were relatively rare. When I did observe such messages, they occurred in the form of having students talk through class work problems with which they had experienced difficulty, providing instructions for how to adapt to experimental errors, and acknowledging student affective and academic difficulties or concerns while also encouraging them to keep moving forward. Occasionally, such messages also included references to ideas of persevering, being brave, finishing strong and the desirability of academic challenge as an opportunity for growth. Only once did I observe the incorporation of a memoir by a young person who had endured significant challenges and specific references to her resilience. Yet, even this example could have been extended by incorporating an opportunity for students to discuss the attributes that helped her to persevere and to reflect upon personal examples of their own growth and resilience through challenges.

Getting Started with Challenges, Resilience and Growth

Teachers can explore with students the stories of people who demonstrated perseverance and resilience through challenging situations and whose lives connect to the discipline or topic of discussion. When possible, teachers might include the voices of African Americans, adolescents, women and other people of color. In addition to novels and memoirs, teachers might consider incorporating shorter blog postings and TED-style talks as means of introducing students to the stories of others.

Moving Forward with Challenges, Resilience and Growth

When exploring the stories of people who have experienced and persevered through challenges, teachers might consider building in classroom assignments that encourage students to

reflect upon the specific conditions or attributes that helped them to overcome their obstacles and/or accomplish their goals. Teachers can also use such writing assignments or discussions to also give students an opportunity to describe the similarities and differences to their own lives and to reflect upon the challenges, supports, resilience and personal growth they have experienced.

<p align="center">CAPSTONE PRODUCT, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION</p>

Capstone Product: Relevance and Care Handbook

After thoroughly analyzing the data to identify patterns of relevance and care, I began the third phase of the project: the preparation of a handbook (*Appendix I*) to share with JWHS administrators as they continued to support teachers in growing in implemented curriculum and instruction relevance and care for African American students in mind. I organized the content of the handbook with regard for the six categories of relevance and care incorporated in the conceptual framework used to inform this project. In addition to including brief summaries based on my analysis of observational and interview data, I also included recommendations to the faculty and administrators for continuing to grow in each of the six areas. My recommendations included a combination of strategies shared in interdisciplinary bodies of literature, approaches currently implemented by JWHS teachers and ideas I generated by employing strategies and principles I have learned during my graduate school career. While some of the recommendations included within the handbook are detailed in the section above, I will detail a sampling of other recommendations directed towards the school administrative team below.

Recommendations to the School Administration

In support of teachers providing relevant curriculum and instruction and care for African American students, recommendations to school administrators included the following:

Survey teachers periodically to gauge their comfort with and implementation of relevance and care strategies. The number of faculty members responding to my invitation to participate in this study suggests that there are several teachers at JWHS who, aware of the focus of my study, were interested in learning more about the study and/or allowing me to visit their classes. Just as a preassessment can help teachers to gauge student background knowledge, surveying teachers to find out their comfort with, interest in and implementation of relevance and care strategies may protect against the need to make even well-founded assumptions regarding who is interested in providing relevant experiences for students. Data from this study suggested that a number of factors could have served as barriers to teachers pursuing curriculum and instruction that is responsive to students' racial and cultural backgrounds, including perceived lack of time, fear of treating students unfairly, not knowing how to do so and perceptions of race as being of less significance to student performance in comparison to other background characteristics. A survey may provide administrators insight with regard to how to address such concerns or misconceptions in ways that help teachers to feel supported and well-equipped to support their African American students.

Facilitate opportunities for teachers to build relationships with rural communities and use "place" as a point of relational and academic connection for students. Whereas some recalled having students from several different locales, most interviewees agreed that the majority of African American students lived in rural areas. Most teachers were able to identify factors that complicated African American students' from rural locales opportunities to participate and excel within the classroom, including transportation from school events, contrasting views regarding the purpose of education, differences in communication styles and expectations, and access to technology. Considering the large number of African American

students from rural locales, I would recommend both facilitating teacher interactions within rural

communities and/or providing professional development to assist with the incorporation of place

as a component of lesson plans and unit designs. This may also include hosting an event within

the community to connect with parents and/or providing assistance to teachers in identifying

connections between their disciplines and the characteristics and values of their students,

students' families and their local communities.

Create a student advisory board. While students were not participants in this study, comments

from teachers and observations of student responses to learning tasks within classes suggested

that they would have valuable insight to offer with regard to the classroom environments within

which they feel most supported and gain the most meaningful and useful learning experiences.

Data from this study suggests that, if needed, there are teachers and school personnel equipped to

offer both training to students on how to effectively and respectfully express their opinions and

advice to administrators regarding how to create environments within which students would feel

welcome to express their insights.

Facilitate opportunities for teachers to collaborate on how to implement relevant

curriculum and instruction within and outside of the classroom. Among teachers

interviewed, most described peers as one of their most valuable resources for continually

learning how to serve African American students. Facilitating collaboration among teachers may

include providing time during faculty meetings for teachers to work with interdisciplinary peers

to plan for implementation of relevance and care strategies. Additionally, the school might

consider first drawing upon the expertise of teachers who have received county-wide training

and/or who are more experienced with enacting strategies for relevance and care to provide brief

demonstrations, mini lessons, or simulations to colleagues, while also devising a plan to invite more teachers to practice and present their developing expertise to peers.

Survey the availability of learning opportunities experienced by students in AVID to African American students in the school's broader student population. JWHS has enjoyed growth and success in its implementation of AVID, a college preparatory program that serves approximately ten percent of the total school population. Aligning with the model set forth by AVID as a national program, the primary recruitment and selection processes for participants at JWHS are based on factors other than race and ethnicity, focusing on students who are potential first generation college participants and/or who average grades in the academic middle (AVID, 2016). Calculations from estimates shared by school personnel suggest that African American students applying and selected to participate in the program may represent less than half of the school's total African American student population at a given time. There was little evidence to suggest that the communication training, connections between academic concepts and the local community, and peer-to-peer academic support offered by the college preparatory elective as it is implemented at Joseph N. Weaver High School occur commonly in general education courses. Limited time, pressure to meet testing requirements and potential gaps in teacher desires and/or readiness to implement curriculum that is responsive to the cultural backgrounds of African American students may be factors that make it difficult to do so. Nevertheless, there may be a critical percentage of African American students who would benefit from and are not receiving the guidance in developing such valuable skill sets, habits of mind and connections to the curriculum, classroom and broader community that students experience through the college preparatory program.

Administrators may consider collecting data for the extent to which African American students, of all educational backgrounds and at all levels of academic achievement, who do not participate in AVID have access to similar support and learning opportunities. In accordance with the data collected, administrators might also prioritize strategies for integrating some of the practices and thought processes used in AVID to reach a broader population of the school's African American students. It would also seem useful to ensure that African American students are aware of the AVID program and its potential benefits to them, and that they feel personally encouraged to apply to be AVID students.

Limitations

This capstone project had several limitations worth noting. The relatively brief, time period designated for data collection may have made it more difficult to build a trusting relationship with teachers and students. In order to pursue a positive rapport within classrooms, I assumed the role of "observer as participant," maintaining data collection as my primary focus within the classrooms, but also willingly "fitting into [teachers'] routines, finding some common ground with them, helping out on occasion, being friendly, and showing interest in the activity" (Merriam, 2009, p. 123). Also, in large part in response to the request of the school principal, I introduced myself to students in classrooms within which I observed, also distributing an information letter about my identity as a graduate student so that they and their parents would be informed of my presence in the classroom. My presence in the classroom as an observer participant may have altered normal classroom dynamics. As a cautionary measure, I was mindful of my body language, avoiding reactions which may have communicated approval or disproval (Merriam, 2009, p. 127). Finally, my sample size was small and depended heavily upon the recommendations of other teachers and administrators. While making the most of

teacher and administrator insider knowledge, this approach to sampling omitted the perspectives

of students (Antrop-González & DeJesús, 2006) and/or parents (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Future

studies related to the concepts in this exploratory case study may benefit from incorporating a

method for students and teachers to recommend teacher participants.

Conclusion

This capstone project had two primary objectives. The first was to consider the ways in

which teachers at Joseph N. Weaver High School provided experiences of relevant curriculum

and instruction to their students. By collecting much of my data from teachers who were

recommended by administrators and peers as being excellent in engaging African American

students, this study also provided valuable information for considering the ways in which teacher

practices mirror a literature-inspired framework for relevance and care as supporting African

American students in assuming roles as learners. I found that, while I did see aspects of my

framework categories in the collective strategies of a few teachers at Joseph N. Weaver High

School, no teacher implemented them all (or demonstrated them to the full extent that they could

be utilized in a classroom). Overall, JWHS teachers varied along a spectrum of mindsets towards

and implementation of aspects of culturally responsive relevance and care for African American

students.

From observational and interview data, several themes also emerged among the practices

of teachers at JWHS, including 1) community-building, 2) constructing narratives, 3) student

voice, 4) race and culturally experiences and perspectives, and 5) trust, time, accessibility and

attention. Among these five themes community-building emerges as a common thread among the

numerous strategies that teachers employed to support African American students. In pursuing

relevance and care, I envision the relationship between the aspects of the framework and the

concept of building community to be interdependent. As building community is essential to the

maintenance of a thriving classroom and the partnership between teachers and school

administrators (Tomlinson, Brimijoin & Narvaez, 2008), it both contributes to a fertile

environment for and may result all the more from the implementation of the framework

categories.

A second, equally important objective was to create a context-informed resource to offer

administrators and teachers at Joseph N. Weaver High School to support their continued growth

towards deeper relevance and care for their African American students. One of the major goals

of a capstone project is to provide guidance to a client in addressing an identified need within an

institution or organization. In this case, the principal of JWHS expressed a desire to remove

barriers to African American students' participation in advanced coursework. My approach to

studying relevance and care and addressing his concern was to consider and address African

American students' participation in school and the development of their identities as learners as

reciprocal processes. Therefore, the handbook (*Appendix I*) prepared for JWHS administrators

and faculty provides a copy of the conceptual framework and recommendations for

implementing curriculum and instruction that are both responsive to students' cultural

backgrounds and that could potentially serve as catalysts for their continued growth as learners.

While data suggests there are numerous gaps and opportunities for growth in providing

relevance and care for African American students at Joseph N. Weaver High School, it also

suggests that there are teachers, who are willing and desire to navigate such challenges. My goal

was to create a resource that would be helpful to teachers at different places along a continuum

of readiness to implement relevance and care strategies. However, perhaps one of the most vital

steps in pursuing relevance and care is for school administrators to evaluate their beliefs

regarding the malleability of teacher attitudes and practices. A partnership between

administrators and teachers to pursue excellence in relevance and care for African American

students only functions if administrators believe that their faculty have and/or can be inspired to

cultivate the mindsets, expertise, and desire to learn that support such schoolwide development,

and vice versa.

The classroom is a critical context for African American student identity development.

Researchers draw links between the way students see themselves and how they process

curriculum, develop skills and build relationships within the classroom (Nasir & Hand, 2008;

Oyserman & Terry, 2006; Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012). Their experiences within the

classroom can influence their preparation to combat negative stereotypes (Aronson, Fried &

Good, 2002), the likelihood of perceiving themselves as participants in different practices or

fields of study (Nasir & Cooks, 2009), the future roles they imagine assuming (Nasir 2002;

Oyserman, 2013), and the extent to which they perceive challenging, desirable future goals as

worthwhile (Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). While numerous studies have

focused on student achievement, studying the characteristics of classrooms that inspire and train

African American students to seek "new information, acquire and deepen conceptual

understandings of subject matter, and come to understand the natural and social world in new

ways" can not only offer insight for improving student performance, but also deepen our

understanding of how to support their self-identification as thriving learners and capable

contributors to their various community circles (Nasir, Snyder, Shah & Ross, 2012, p. 286).

Darling-Hammond, Williamson & Hyler (2007) remark,

As the fate of individuals and nations is increasingly tied up in their ability to learn, the quest for access to an equitable, empowering education for African Americans has become a critical issue for the American nation as a whole. No nation can thrive in a technological, knowledge-based economy by starving large segments of its population of learning opportunities. The path to national well-being-like the path to full citizenship-is built on educational opportunity grounded in equitable resources, expert and culturally responsive teaching, and an openly available curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking and performance for all… (p. 292-293)

The continual pursuit of understanding how to create safe, worthwhile, motivating and engaging spaces for students of color to assume roles as learners, is not just a critical issue for African Americans, but for all people. Likewise, as researchers, teachers, administrators and communities work together to study and implement relevant curriculum and instruction and practices of care for African American students, academicians and practitioners might find that they are all the more equipped to provide rich learning experiences for the broader student population as a whole.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Conceptual Framework for Relevance and Care and Potential Influences on African American Students' Experiences within the Classroom

Relevant Curriculum and Instruction

or *meaningful* and *useful* curriculum and instruction, may include opportunities for students to

build **connections**

between the classroom and facets of diverse cultures, including

diverse perspectives, experiences and **contributions**

community funds of knowledge

students' language practices

students' interests

engage in **critical** and **reflective thinking**

about

information sources within and outside of the classroom

students' **personal, local, national** and **international** environments

make **contributions**

through

exploring **flexible roles** and possibilities for **agency**

producing goods services and **information**

and

(work together to contribute to and support)

Caring *for* Students

through

high expectations, rigor and academic and affective support

belief in **malleability of intelligence**

demonstrating that **challenges** present opportunities for **growth**

Student motivation/ engagement

Student learning and retention

Student positioning self as "learner" and "doer"

Growing teacher adeptness to recognize and develop student capacity

Appendix B

Classroom Observation Tool

Date:	**Focus Categories:**
Classroom Teacher:	**Start Time:**
Period/Subject:	**End Time:**

Relevance
Building Connections **(BC)** between the classroom and facets of culture such as   - Diverse perspectives, **experiences** and/or contributions. **(E)**   - Community funds of **knowledge**. **(K)**   - Student **language** practices. **(L)**   - Personal **interests**. **(I)**
Critical and Reflective Thinking **(CR)** about   - Information **sources** within and outside of the classroom. **(S)**   - Personal, local, national and international ecologies. **(P)**
Contributions **(CON)** through   - Flexible roles and possibilities for **agency** within and outside of the classroom.**(A)**   - Producers of goods, services and information **(M)**
Care *for* Students
- High **expectations**, **rigorous** curriculum and academic and affective **support (ExRS)**   - Malleability of intelligence **(MI)**   - Possibilities for growth presented by challenges and resilience **(CG)**

Time:	**Observation Notes:**	**Researcher Comments:**

Appendix B (continued)

Classroom Observation Tool

Date: Focus Categories:

Classroom Teacher: Start Time:

Period/Subject: End Time:

Time:	Observation Notes:	Researcher Comments:

Appendix C

Academic Teacher Interview Protocol

Hi, my name is Davonda Smith and I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Leadership, Foundations, and Policy department at the University of Virginia. I am studying relevance, care and teacher practices that support African American students as learners. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I will be asking you several questions. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. There are no right or wrong answers. The purpose is to gain a better understanding of your thought processes, experiences with and approaches to teaching African American students. This interview is designed to take place during one to two, 30-45 minutes sessions. If there are any questions that you would like to skip or do not feel comfortable answering, please let me know and we can move on to the next question or stop the interview. I will be jotting down notes as you share, but this interview will also be audio recorded. The recording will help me to engage more attentively and accurately recall what you share during and after the interview. The audio recording will be saved and transcribed using a pseudonym in place of your real name. If you wish to stop the recording at any point, please let me know and I will do so. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. How many years have you been teaching? What do you enjoy most about being a teacher?

2. Can you describe the demographic makeup of your classes this year? How is it the same or different from past years?

3. How would you describe your teaching style? Are there instructional approaches that you have found to be more/less effective with your African American students? (Follow up question: Why do you think that they were more or less effective?)

4. What are some strategies that you have found to be effective for helping African American students to build connections between their lives (or broader social contexts) and what they are learning in the classroom? Between their personal interests and classroom materials?

5. What skills or strategies would you say are most useful for African American students as they consider the information available to them through sources within and outside of your classroom? What are some strategies that you have used to help them to develop such skills?

6. What types of roles do your African American students take on in the classroom? Outside of the classroom? Outside of school? Can you describe some ways you build in opportunities for your students to make meaningful contributions to the classroom, school and/or larger community(ies)?

7. Can you describe a situation when many of your African American students seemed like they were really "hooked" on a topic or lesson? When they seemed to really "get it?" (Possible follow up questions: What topic(s) were they studying? What helped you to know that they were "hooked?" What do you think helped them to engage with the lesson? What do you think made the concepts sink in? What were they prepared to do once they left?)

8. What strategies do you use to get to know your African American students? (Their interests? Strengths? Needs?) Which have you found to be most helpful?

9. Can you identify a time(s) when you have considered your personal racial experiences and ideas about African Americans and/or people from racial backgrounds different than your own? In what ways, if any, do you think that your racial experiences have influenced your approaches to teaching African American students?

10. In what ways do you communicate your expectations regarding class participation and academic performance to African American students? How do you respond when students are performing poorly? Are there specific types of support or feedback that you have found to be particularly effective?

11. How would your students of color fill in the following blank?

    I know that Mr./Ms. _____ cares for me because he/she _____.

12. What resources have you found to be most helpful to you as you have pursued caring for African American students and offering them relevant learning experiences?

13. Can you share more about [insert reference to activity/conversation/strategy noted from classroom observation that would be helpful to know more about]? Why did you choose [insert activity/topic/strategy]? What were your goals for [activity/strategy/conversation]?

That was my last question. Do you have any questions? Thank you so much for your time!

Appendix D

School Principal Interview Protocol

Hi, my name is Davonda Smith and I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Leadership, Foundations, and Policy department at the University of Virginia. I am studying relevance, care and teacher practices that support African American students as learners. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I will be asking you several questions. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. There are no right or wrong answers. The purpose is to gain a better understanding of your thought processes and experiences with serving African American students and the approaches to teaching at your school. This interview is designed to take place during one to two, 30-45 minutes sessions. If there are any questions that you would like to skip or do not feel comfortable answering, please let me know and we can move on to the next question or stop the interview. I will be jotting down notes as you share, but this interview will also be audio recorded. The recording will help me to engage more attentively and accurately recall what you share during and after the interview. The audio recording will be saved and transcribed using a pseudonym in place of your real name. If you wish to stop the recording at any point, please let me know and I will do so. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. How would you describe the teaching styles of your most engaging teachers of African American students?

2. What are additional characteristics of classrooms where African American students seem to be the most engaged? The most successful? The most confident as learners at [school pseudonym]?

   (Follow up questions: What types of activities or exercises are they doing? What topics are they studying? How would you describe their relationships with the teacher and other students?)

3. What are some specific ways that you have seen [school pseudonym] teachers care *for* their African American students?

4. Have you noticed any patterns in the values, activities and interests African American students pursue outside of the classroom? Outside of school? Have you seen any great examples of teachers incorporating students' values and interests into their classroom lessons?

5. What do you think are some of the greatest needs of African American students who attend [school pseudonym]? What are some of their greatest strengths? What are some creative and/or effective ways that you have noticed teachers addressing those needs? Making the most of some of the strengths that you mentioned?

6. What have been some of the opportunities available to the parents, guardians and/or other members of African American students' communities to participate in students' classrooms and/or other school events?

7. What resources are available to teachers at your school who are seeking to make their curriculum and instruction more meaningful and useful for students of color?

8. What recent policy(ies) and/or initiative(s) would you say have most influenced the way that your teachers approach instruction? What types of support and/or resources have been most helpful to them?

9. Do you remember a time when an African American student or group of students expressed excitement about what they were learning? What were they learning about and why were they excited?

10. Can you identify a time(s) when you have considered your personal racial experiences and ideas about African Americans and/or people from racial backgrounds different than your own? In what ways, if any, do you think that your experiences have influenced your approaches to serving African American students?

11. How would you summarize your hope(s) for students of color at your school? For teachers serving African American students at [school pseudonym]?

That was my last question. Do you have any questions? Thank you so much for your time!

Appendix E

AVID Teacher/Gifted Resource Teacher Interview Protocol

Hi, my name is Davonda Smith and I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Leadership, Foundations, and Policy department at the University of Virginia. I am studying relevance, care and teacher practices that support African American students as learners. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I will be asking you several questions. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. There are no right or wrong answers. The purpose is to gain a better understanding of your thought processes, experiences with and approaches to serving African American students. This interview is designed to take place during one to two, 30-45 minutes sessions. If there are any questions that you would like to skip or do not feel comfortable answering, please let me know and we can move on to the next question or stop the interview. I will be jotting down notes as you share, but this interview will also be audio recorded. The recording will help me to engage more attentively and accurately recall what you share during and after the interview. The audio recording will be saved and transcribed using a pseudonym in place of your real name. If you wish to stop the recording at any point, please let me know and I will do so. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. How many years have you been teaching? What do you enjoy most about [an AVID instructor or gifted resource teacher]?

2. Can you describe the demographic makeup of your classes (or the students that you serve) this year? How is it the same or different from past years?

3. How would you describe your teaching style? Are there instructional approaches that you have found to be more/less effective with your African American students? (Follow up question: Why do you think that they were more or less effective?)

4. What strategies do you use to get to know your African American students? (Their interests? Strengths? Needs?) Which have you found to be most helpful?

5. What are some strategies that you have found to be effective for helping African American students to build connections between their lives (or broader social contexts) and what they are learning in the classroom? Between their personal interests and classroom materials?

6. Have you noticed any patterns in the values, activities and interests African American students pursue outside of the classroom? Have you seen any great examples of teachers incorporating students' values and interests into their classroom lessons? (Please feel free to share examples from your own class as well.)

7. What types of roles do your African American students take on in the classroom? Outside of the classroom? At home and within their communities? Can you describe some ways that you build in opportunities for your students to make meaningful contributions to the classroom, school and/or larger community(ies)?

8. What are some ways that you have noticed African American students connecting what they are learning in discipline-specific coursework with future educational, occupational, civic or other personal goals?

9. Can you describe a situation when one or several of your African American students seemed like they were really "hooked" on a topic or lesson (either in your or another teacher's class)? When they seemed to really "get it?" (Possible follow up questions: What topic(s) were they studying? What helped you to know that they were "hooked?" What do you think helped them to engage with the lesson? What do you think made the concepts sink in? What were they prepared to do once they left?)

10. What do you think are some of the greatest needs of African American students who attend [school pseudonym]? What are some of their greatest strengths? What are some creative and/or effective ways that you have noticed teachers addressing those needs? Making the most of some of the strengths that you mentioned? (Please feel free to also share examples from your own class.)

11. In what ways do you communicate your expectations regarding class participation and academic performance to African American students? How do you respond when students are performing poorly? Are there specific types of support or feedback that you have found to be particularly effective?

12. How would your students of color fill in the following blank?

    I know that Mr./Ms. _____ cares for me because he/she _____.

13. Can you identify a time(s) when you have considered your personal racial experiences and ideas about African Americans and/or people from racial backgrounds different than your own? In what ways, if any, do you think that your racial experiences have influenced your approaches to teaching African American students?

14. What resources have you found to be most helpful to you as you have pursued caring for African American students and offering them relevant learning experiences?

15. Can you share more about [insert reference to activity/conversation/strategy noted from classroom observation that would be helpful to know more about]? Why did you choose [insert activity/topic/strategy]? What were your goals for [activity/strategy/conversation]?

That was my last question. Do you have any questions? Thank you so much for your time!

Appendix F
Common Area Walkthrough Checklist

School Walkthrough Checklist for Noting Relevance and Care in School Common Areas			
Date:		Time:	
Period/Subject:			
CATEGORY	**+/-**	**LOCATION (hall, media center, etc.)**	**MEDIUM (Intercom, bulletin board, etc.)**
Building Connections			
Diverse perspectives, experiences, contributions			
Community funds of knowledge			
Language diversity			
Student Interests			
Engaging in Critical and Reflective Thinking			
Information sources within and/or outside of the classroom			
Students' personal, local, national and international environments			
Making Contributions			
Flexible roles and possibilities for agency			
Producing goods, services and information			
Caring *for* students			
High expectations, rigor and academic and affective support			
Malleability of intelligence			
Opportunities for growth presented through challenge			

   Notes:

Appendix G
Classroom Walkthrough/Visit Checklist

Classroom Walkthrough/Visit Checklist for Observing School Relevance and Care Patterns			
Date:		Room Number:	
Period/Subject:		Time:	
	+/-		+/-
CONNECTIONS			
Diverse perspectives, experiences, contributions		**Community Funds of Knowledge**	
Perspectives, challenges and contributions of people from ethnically diverse populations.		Incorporation of knowledge and perspectives of community parents, scholars and practitioners to inform curriculum content.	
Diverse primary sources, online museums, and electronic archives and databases, etc.		Formal and informal opportunities to get to know students' parents and communities	
Students receive guidance for critiquing and consulting different resources to fill in gaps in understanding.		Demonstration of care for students' lives outside of the classroom.	
Teacher seeks deeper understanding about the collective histories and variations in cultural and personal backgrounds of others, including his/her students.		Student opportunities to reflect upon and/or share what knowledge they bring into the classroom about subjects.	
		Reference to how student understandings may change, remain the same or enrich a broader understanding of the discipline as they participate in the classroom learning process	
Student Interests		**Language Diversity**	
Use of preassessments and/or informal surveys to learn students' interests.		Students/teacher uses "dialectically diverse texts."	
Students asked to share interests and ideas for ways to explore content, concepts and skills.		Teacher and students discuss language variation, linguistic equality of dialects and style switching.	
Meaningful and "purposeful" opportunities for students to share interests and learning with members of the classroom community.		Students explore how language varieties may be intertwined with structures of power, social membership and identity.	
Students have choices for how they learn and demonstrate their new understandings.		Students discuss variability in personal language choices.	
Teacher helps to access information about the topics that interest students, through material, ideational and/or relational resources.			
CRITICAL AND REFLECTIVE THINKING			

Critical Consumerism		Personal, local, national and international environments	
Distinction drawn between generalizations and stereotypes, studies of stereotypes in mass media trends, and/or connections drawn to analogous concepts and principles in other disciplines (underline all observed).		Examples and exploration of pertinence of classroom content, concepts and skills to local communities.	
Exploration into how patterns related to movement, politics, social dynamics, education and/or religious and moral values have influenced the choices and behaviors of people (underline all observed).		Examples and exploration of pertinence of local communities' values, perspectives, events and/or issues to classroom content, concepts and skills (underline all observed).	
Students practice skills and methods of inquiry of researchers and writers of different disciplines in meaningful ways.		Exploration in evolution of trends (social, health, land use, entertainment availability of resources, etc.) in local communities.	
Teacher reflects upon his/her racial experiences and ideas about social and cultural communities and challenges personal stereotypes and biases.		Connections between state, national and global issues, classroom content, and students' local context/environment (underline all observed).	
CONTRIBUTIONS			
Flexible Roles and Agency		**Students as Producers of Goods, Services and Information**	
Opportunities for collaborative and individual work.		Students create products for "meaningful audiences."	
Links drawn between content, skills, and concepts and students' personal goals and desired future identities.		Lessons draw connections between skills and concepts and their real world application.	
Lessons replicate and "guide students in working and thinking like experts" in the discipline.		Lessons connect the primary classroom discipline with other disciplines.	
		Students use tools and resources like those used by professionals in the discipline to engage create goods, perform services, and/or engage in inquiry, collect and analyze new information (underline all observed).	
		Teacher connects problem solving strategies familiar to students with problems, skills and habits of mind employed by professionals.	
CARING FOR STUDENTS			
High Expectations, Rigor and Support		Teacher uses language to suggest belief that he/she and/or students can grow in intelligence and other desirable qualities or skills.	

Curriculum is organized around big ideas and instruction is differentiated.		Students identify and record personal learning goals for a unit/lesson, reflect on how they are doing in meeting those goals, and identify strategies that will help them to be more effective (underline all observed).	
Student idle time is minimized through "anchor activities," for early, scaffolding in areas in which students experience difficulties and opportunities for "ascending intellectual demand" for students requiring additional challenge (underline all observed).		**Resilience, Challenge and Growth**	
Assignments have clear guidelines and "indicators of quality" that reflect the learning goals for the lesson/unit.		All students have opportunities to engage in "complex thinking" (Darling-Hammond, Williamson & Hyler, 2007; Tomlinson, 2003, p. 63).	
Teacher takes advantage of opportunities to grow in depth of understanding of content area.		Students are prompted to reflect upon their learning process.	
Malleability of Intelligence		Teacher pursues learning and investigating content, skills and concepts **with** students.	
Use of classroom grouping strategies that allow for mobility of "membership"		Class considers the experiences of men and women from a variety of ethnic groups who have contributed to an understanding of the discipline.	
Teacher provides feedback on student work and class participation, including practical aid and strategies toward mastery of concepts and skills.		Students are prompted to compare their own goals, challenges and experiences with those who have excelled in the field.	

Appendix H
Sample of Excel Observation Coding Summary (Building Connections)

Appendix I
Relevance and Care Handbook

Review of Relevance and Care Practices:
[School Name] High School
February & March, 2016

Reviewer: Davonda Smith, *University of Virginia*

Introduction

Why Pursue Relevance and Care?

The classroom is a critical setting for African American students' learning and identity development. Researchers draw links between the way students see themselves and how they make sense of curriculum, develop skills and build relationships within the classroom (Nasir & Hand, 2008; Oyserman & Terry, 2006; Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012). Students' classroom experiences can influence how prepared they are to combat negative stereotypes (Aronson, Fried & Good, 2002), the likelihood that they will think of themselves as participants in different practices or fields of study (Nasir & Cooks, 2009), the future roles they imagine for themselves (Nasir 2002; Oyserman, 2013), and the extent to which they believe challenging and desirable future goals are worth pursuing (Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). While a lot of research and practice has focused on improving student achievement, studying the characteristics of classrooms that inspire and train African American students to seek "new information, acquire and deepen conceptual understandings of subject matter, and come to

understand the natural and social world in new ways" can help us to better understand not only how to improve student performance, but how to support their self-identification as thriving learners and capable contributors to their various community circles (Nasir, Snyder, Shah & Ross, 2012, p. 286). Relevant, or meaningful and useful, curriculum and teacher care play key roles in creating rich and inviting spaces for African American students to engage as learners. Researchers and seasoned education professionals suggest that there are several elements that may be particularly useful in creating inspiring, accessible, and engaging spaces for African American students to thrive as both learners and doers.

Review Process

Over the course of eight weeks, I visited, observed classes and interviewed several teachers and administrators to review teacher practices of relevance and care at [School Name]. For the purpose of providing feedback useful to the school administration for assist their faculty in pursuing effective relevance and care practices to support African American students as learners, classes and teachers collectively represented a variety of grade and difficulty levels and STEM, world language and humanities disciplines. The goal of this review was *not* to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the practices of *all* teachers at [School Name]. Therefore, I observed, interviewed and/or visited the classrooms of a sample of 19 teachers and administrators to gain a sense for the types of recommendations that would be most helpful to [School Name] High School moving forward with relevance and care practices for African American students. Between January and March 2016, I conducted approximately 55 hours of observations and interviews, using a framework that combined research related to relevance, care and African American student identity development to guide both my data collection and analysis processes.

The faculty and administrators of [School Name] warmly welcomed me into the school community and their classrooms. I saw a range of responses to instruction of African American students and a range of strategies for doing so. Teachers' attitudes and practices in this area represented a continuum of knowledge about working effectively with African American students, understandings of the opportunities and challenges in doing so, and skills in implementing culturally responsive practices in the classroom. The purpose of this handbook is to make recommendations that can assist teachers at all levels of confidence and proficiency in continuing to develop attitudes and practices most likely to benefit these students, and other students as well.

Within this handbook, I have included several recommendations for how to implement aspects of relevance and care to enrich the practices of teachers at [School Name]. Some of the recommendations included in this handbook were informed by observing the practices of [School Initials] teachers who are already implementing some relevance and care strategies and mindsets similar to the approaches that compose the included relevance and care framework. Others are based on practices I did *not* observe during my tenure at [School Initials], as well as what I learned to be potential concerns and/or opportunities for growth as faculty and administrators serve African American students.

How to Use This Handbook and What You Will Find Inside

In the pages that follow, I have included a framework for conceptualizing the relationship between relevance and care and potential positive student and teacher outcomes as well as recommendations to support teachers at a variety of different levels of readiness in understanding and implementing culturally responsive relevance and care strategies.

Moving forward, school administrators may consider using this guide as a resource to inform the following:

1) Working together with teachers to develop a common vocabulary, schoolwide mission, and plan of action for discussing and going after providing consistent experiences of relevance and care for African American students.

2) Pursuing a schoolwide culture that understands the impact of relevance and care on African American student learning, achievement, and identity development and considers both to be nonnegotiable aspects of curriculum and instruction for all students.

3) Developing a mechanism for evaluating the attitudes, levels of comfort and practices of teachers with regard to relevance and care for African American students.

4) Providing professional development that is responsive to the needs of teachers at different levels of readiness and comfort.

5) Developing a mechanism or tool for consulting students about their experiences of relevance and care within their classrooms.

To support you in doing so, this handbook has several elements. I have included a copy of the relevance and care framework as an illustration of how the various aspects can work together to produce desirable student and teacher outcomes. Additionally, you will find a table for each category that includes:

- a brief description of the category and why it is important,
- a summary analysis of [insert school name] classrooms,
- a description of what a classroom that emphasizes the category looks, sounds, and/or feels like (Tomlinson, Brimijoin & Narvaez, 2008), and
- recommendations for moving forward

To close out the handbook I have included:

- a description of what a relevance and care partnership looks, sounds and/or feels like,
- a list of practical first steps,
- recommended questions for self-reflection and/or to further discussions among administrators and teachers (in small groups during faculty meetings, in teacher professional learning communities or during other professional development opportunities), and
- a list of additional recommendations.

Relevance and Care Framework

 While there are additional ways of making curriculum and instruction relevant and demonstrating care for students, research and professional literature suggests that the elements of the framework below may work toward supporting different aspects of student learning, identity development, and performance. On the pages that follow, I will share my analysis of teacher practices with regard for each of the six relevance and care framework categories at [School Name], along with recommendations for continued growth.

Relevance and Care and Potential Influences on African American Students' Experiences within the Classroom
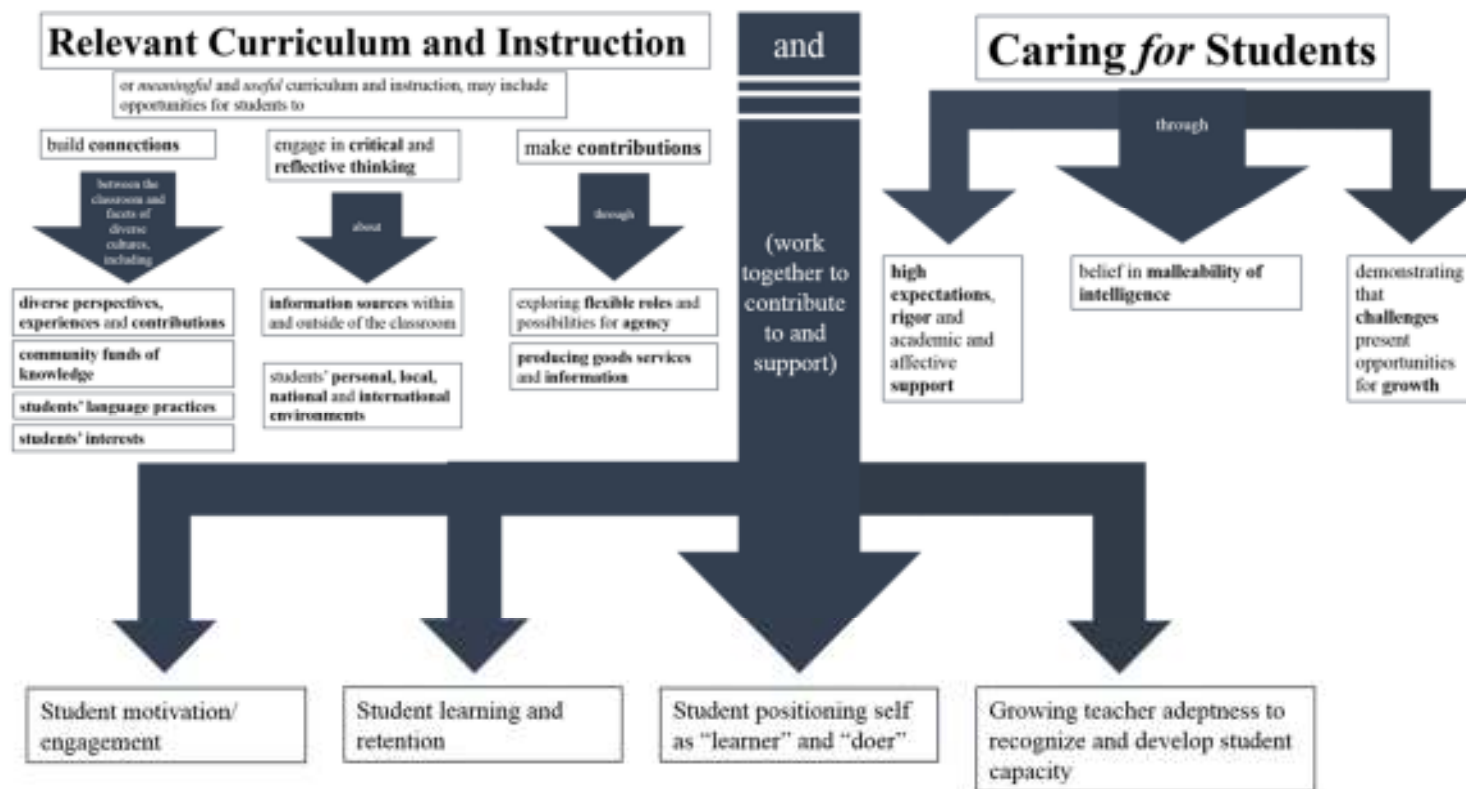
Developed by Davonda M. Smith, University of Virginia

Building Connections
Relevant curriculum and instruction for African American students connects content and skills to the people, cultures, places, languages, ideas and activities with which they identify, that have personal meaning to them and/or are of particular interest to them. As it is a central facet of identity for many African American students, teachers miss out on opportunities to help their students see themselves in the curriculum when they overlook race and ethnicity and/or omit from their instruction the perspectives of communities of color.
SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS Teachers built connections between students, the curriculum and discipline in different ways and to different extents. Though some teachers were deliberate about including works of literature by authors of color and providing space for students to consider issues related to race in class, examples were much less prevalent in STEM classes. There could be several reasons for this, including the perception of science as a discipline of universals that transcend the specifics of culture and race, as mentioned informally by one participant. Additionally, the importance of focusing on the specific needs of African American students as a cultural group could be overshadowed by perceptions of race as a primarily physical trait and the presence of social factors that seem more influential, such as the socioeconomic status of students.

Among teachers who deliberately incorporated the experiences and perspectives of African Americans and other people of color, their efforts seemed to be characterized by focusing either on helping students to consider the strengths, perseverance and contributions of diverse people or to make sure students were aware of the reality, severity and complexity of issues related to race. In such cases, teachers' desires for their students included to empower them to consider and express their opinions, to be prepared to learn and interact in other contexts within and outside of school, and for their African American students' voices to be appreciated and heard.

While some teachers provided students with choices for topics to study or ways in which to demonstrate their understanding of concepts or skills, there was very little evidence of teachers inviting students to share their interests informally or through interest inventories. During interviews, participants by-in-large identified sports and church as issues, interests and values of importance to African American students. Furthermore, it was very rare that teacher references to students' interests included topics outside of sports, fashion or dance, whether during direct conversations with students or during interviews. Teachers mentioned church with students much less frequently. While the consistent identification of sports and church as key interests could be an indication of teachers knowing their students well, both are also areas stereotypically associated with African Americans. Thus, it would be worthwhile for teachers to examine whether or not there are additional (and more specific) values, local and/or larger scale issues, and interests (including phenomena, curiosities, hobbies and academic topics) that captivate their African American students.

Additionally, probing into the reasons *why* students gravitate towards interests such as sports and church may provide

opportunities for the identifying of intriguing principles and points of curricular and relational connection.

Some teachers expressed during interviews valuing the perspectives students contributed to the classroom. The way teachers

described students' background knowledge ranged from finding it important to "celebrat[e] students' personal anecdotes" to

students' personal experiences being essential to the nature of the discipline and structure of the classroom. While there was some

evidence through displays of student work, I saw few examples of teachers connecting to students funds of knowledge during

class sessions. Occasionally, teachers described ways they facilitated exchanges of knowledge and skills between students and

community members, though this was uncommon.

Participants occasionally, and sometimes without prompting, shared about the significance of parents in the lives of students.

Descriptions of parents of African American students included them mostly living in rural locales, being hardworking and willing

to contribute what they were able, and respecting when teachers reach out to them and/or demonstrate a willingness to help their

children. Though the principal shared that parents in general contribute to lessons from time to time as guest speakers, I did not

observe any class sessions when parents of students visited or spoke in classrooms. There could be a number of reasons for this

being the case based on what participants shared, including the nature and frequency of parent work obligations, a general

decrease in all parent involvement from elementary to high school, and parents focusing their involvement in students' schooling through volunteering time and resources to students' sports and extracurricular pursuits. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that several comments related to rural parents, however respectfully noted, implied limitations to what they were able to provide. With no intentions of minimizing parents contributing in such ways, teachers should avoid a potential deficit perspective by cautiously balancing an understanding for the values and economic constraints that shape the ways that parents of rural African American students contribute with continuing to consider ways they can share their personal funds of knowledge through the conversations and learning processes taking place within the classroom.

I did not observe any examples of teachers and students connecting to the curriculum through diverse language practices. Conversations with teachers suggested that at least a couple discuss and provide training to their students in how to engage in different language practices for different purposes and in different settings. Nevertheless, there was no evidence to suggest that this was a common aspect of general classroom practices throughout the school.

Building connections to facets of diverse cultures looks, sounds or feels like the following:

Diverse Perspectives, Experiences, Contributions

- Including the challenges and contributions of people from ethnically diverse populations

- Guiding students in exploring different perspectives from varied cultures and the relative virtues of those perspectives

- Making use of resources such as diverse primary sources, online museums, electronic archives and databases

- Providing guidance to students for consulting a variety of resources to fill in gaps in understanding left by classroom textbooks

- Personally seeking deeper understanding about the collective histories and variations in cultural and personal backgrounds of others

Community Funds of Knowledge

- Using the knowledge experiences, and perspectives of parents and community to enrich curriculum

- Pursuing formal and informal opportunities to get to know students' parents and communities

- Acknowledging and finding ways to connect students' traditional ways of knowing and doing with the curriculum

- Facilitating opportunities to learn from the experiences and skills of parents and other local community member

Students Interests

- Using preassessments and/or informal surveys to learn students' interests.

- Asking students to share their extracurricular **and** academic interests and ideas for ways to explore content, concepts and skills.

- Incorporating ways for students to share their evolving interests and learning with others

- Giving students choices for how they learn and demonstrate their new understandings.

- Helping students to explore the topics that interest them through providing material resources, brainstorming, recommendations, feedback and relational support.

- Connecting students to peers, teachers and professionals with similar interests.

Language Diversity

- Using "dialectically diverse texts" to explore concepts and principles.

- Exploring with students how different languages and dialects may be intertwined with ethnic and regional cultures, structures of power, social membership and identity.

- Discussing concepts such as the existence and value of language and dialectal variety and style switching.

- Exploring what factors and contexts influence their personal language choices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Getting Started:

1) Work together with colleagues to research ways the primary classroom discipline has been influenced by diverse and traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups, including African Americans.

2) Conduct an inventory of the posters, textbooks and other resources that are visible and/or commonly used within classroom(s). Be on the lookout specifically for resources that may perpetuate racial stereotypes regarding who are the

significant faces, voices and/or contributors to academic disciplines (to the exclusion of others). Consider removing or replacing such resources with ones that include more diverse representation.

Moving Forward:

3) Build in questions or projects that help students explore the cultural influences and motivations for scientific studies and the social and economic influences of discoveries and/or innovations on diverse communities.

4) As teachers expressed a concern for students receiving only one story of what it means to be African American, when incorporating texts by diverse authors, teachers might consider balancing a focus on race with considering the universal themes around which authors and professionals have focused their work. Devoting greater attention to universal themes or other aspects of authors' experiences can also serve as potential "entry points" for discussing more complex racial and social issues

5) Teachers can also balance an understanding for the economic constraints that shape the ways that parents of African American students volunteer with continuing to consider ways they can contribute their personal funds of knowledge to the conversations and learning processes taking place within the classroom.

6) Teachers can also build in questions or projects that help students explore the cultural influences and motivations for scientific studies and the social and economic influences on diverse communities of discoveries and/or innovations.

Critical and Reflective Thinking

African American students may benefit from classroom learning experiences through which they practice critically and reflectively considering the 1) information sources to which they have access (Cortes, 2001; Gay, 2010; Loewen, 2010) and 2) the places within which students live (Azano, 2011; Banks, 2008). This may include guiding them through weighing the cultural messages communicated through textbook content, media and their social interactions. It may also involve teachers working with students to examine the features of the places within which they live and the ways in which their local, national and international contexts connect to their academic subjects.

SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS

Among teachers observed and interviewed, most expressed a desire for students to be able to think about their opinions regarding locally, national or internationally pertinent issues and/or to consider the characteristics and implications of societal systems, traditions and structures. Collectively, teachers expressed the importance of students being able to identify author biases, distinguish between prejudice and unawareness and to have access to alternate narratives regarding who they are individually, as members of the African diaspora, and with regard to the perspectives and opportunities available to them. Nevertheless, there was little evidence to suggest that such skills were deliberately explored and cultivated in many classrooms throughout the school. There were few if any instances when classes distinguished between generalizations and stereotypes and specifically challenged common media depictions of different groups of people, and I only observed one class where students composed responses to

ethnic and regional stereotypes they had either experienced or about which they were aware. While at least one teacher

incorporated comments about culturally biased representations of cultures and historical concepts in art and popular culture as part

of her lectures, I did not observe instances where her students actually engaged in deeper explorations or discussions about the

embedded stereotypes.

Although not completely absent, examples of teachers drawing deliberate connections between the classroom content and the

values, perspectives, traditions and/or evolution of trends of students' local communities were infrequent. While one teacher

planned an opportunity for students to interact with members of a nearby community and question the purposes and efficacy of

public spaces, in depth explorations of the concept of "place" were uncommon outside of this specific examples, and almost

exclusively occurring in elective courses. Despite a large percentage of African Americans and the general school student body

living in rural areas, integration of the characteristics and features of rural locales was even less frequent.

Critical and reflective thinking (about information sources and with place in mind) looks, sounds or feels like the following:

Information Sources

- Studying the difference between generalizations and stereotypes and discussing the characteristics, pros and cons of each

- Helping students identify stereotypes in mass media, counterexamples and alternative representations of groups of people

- (Teacher) reflecting on personal racial experiences and ideas about social and cultural communities and challenging

  personal biases

- Derailing personal and students' stereotypes about who can participate in what disciplines

- Practicing with students the skills and methods of examination and inquiry used by researchers and practitioners of

  different disciplines

- Deliberately displaying visuals that showcase multicultural participation in the discipline

- Removing and/or challenging posters that perpetuate stereotypes about who are the major voices in the discipline

Place

- Exploring the pertinence and application of the classroom curriculum within local communities

- Incorporating the values, histories and interests of local communities into lessons

- Guiding discussions of how the values, perspectives, issues and experiences of local communities relate to classroom

  lessons

- Exploring evolving trends and patterns in local cultures (i.e. geography, politics, social dynamics, education, occupations,

  arts, environmental characteristics, mass media, access to resources) have influenced the choices, values and behaviors of

  different communities

- Connecting state, national and global issues with students' local contexts

RECOMMENDATIONS

Getting Started:

1) To prepare students for navigating the cultural messages they receive on a daily basis through mass media, textbooks and social interactions, teachers can plan discussions and/or exercises to help students learn to distinguish between generalizations and stereotypes.

2) Consider ways to deliberately present essential classroom curricula through the lens of students' local context. As a beginning step, this may include building in opportunities for students to explore in what ways their local contexts confirm or present contrasting examples in relation to classroom content. Manifesting itself in different ways for different disciplines, this may also include helping students to first identify the physical, social, economic and/or environmental characteristics of their local environments.

Moving Forward:

3) Rather than disposing of them, teachers may consider using outdated posters and textbook as springboards for exploring biased messages and accounts of who has participated in different historical and academic processes, discussing the historical influences that may have led to such depictions and identifying contrasting perspectives and counterexamples.

4) Teachers can also guide students in projects that encourage them to study the evolution of a social, environmental, artistic, political and/or economic trends over the course of time in their neighborhoods and/or locales. Teachers might also consider guiding students in exploring how such changes may have been influenced by a broader state or national context or may reflect a similar evolution in other locations.

Contributions

Creating spaces for students to explore roles as important contributors to disciplinary discussions and potential agents of change has the potential to promote student growth and further prepare them to be well-informed, well-equipped citizens (Azano, 2011; Banks, 2008; Darling-Hammond, Williams & Hyler, 2007; Gay, 2010; Loewen, 2010). Engaging in learning tasks that have particular pertinence to their lives or desired future roles *and* the class subject additionally increases the likelihood that they will find it necessary to continue exploring the discipline (Anderson, 2007). Additionally, student benefit from opportunities to address "real world problems" and to produce goods, services and/or ideas for real audiences.

SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS

In some classes, teachers prompted students to consider the roles they could play within different present-day and future contexts. Most times, this seemed to flow organically during discussion of a particular topic or in response to a student question or conversation. Nevertheless, I only observed consistent references to students' possible future selves with specific links to the

classroom discipline in one class. The teacher frequently either referred to the students as scientists or linked the learning tasks

and thought processes within which students were engaging to the practices of scientists and researchers. Referring to students as

burgeoning experts or professionals within a discipline was not a widespread practice.

Similarly, it was not common for classes to include deliberately planned opportunities for students to apply what they were

learning in authentic ways to produce goods, services or information for real audiences. There were only a few examples of

teachers having set in motion interactions that would allow students to respond to an identified opportunity, problem or need using

concepts and skills to be explored in class. Deliberately planned exchanges of that sort were rare. Overall classes varied in the

extent to which the descriptions and instructions students received for learning tasks replicated real issues. In most classes, such

links seemed to more so serve in the same way as word problems: "set-ups," scenarios and opportunities to *imagine* skills and

concepts within a context, rather than leading to the production of knowledge, goods and services that students could contribute to

an identified community.

Among classes observed, it was more common for teachers to have built in opportunities for students to contribute to *each other's*

learning within the classroom. In some cases, it was normal practice for students to contribute to their classmates by preparing and

leading discussions on various topics, providing feedback to each other on their thinking and performance, and/or holding each

other accountable for their behavior and/or task completion. In two particular classes, this seemed to be built into the structure of the class or to be a dynamic facilitated by the teacher, especially as teachers invited students to provide oral feedback or assistance to peers with topics, skill sets or ways of thinking with which students' felt confident. Nevertheless, classes varied in the extent to which teachers provided opportunities for students to take on a variety of roles among their peers. While some teachers built in opportunities for African American students to assume positions of leadership, support and of providing constructive feedback to their peers, it was more common to observe class time devoted to whole class, teacher lectures and/or teacher assigned, individual student work.

Giving students opportunities to explore and make **contributions** looks, sounds or feels like the following:

Flexible Roles and Possibilities for Agency

- Giving students opportunities for individual and collaborative work

- Asking students about their personal, academic and career goals (who they desire to be in the future)

- Helping students connect their personal and professional goals with what they are learning about in class

- Discussing how to use what students are learning in class to help them work towards their personal and professional goals

- Exploring with students how to work and think like experts

- Encouraging students to think of and share new and creative ways to consider issues, address needs and/or solve problems

- Ensuring that students have opportunities and training in participating in classroom discussions

- Creating spaces for students to lead and provide feedback to peers in classroom discussions, activities and assignments

- Facilitating students learning from and developing relationships with local scholars and professionals in areas related to students' interest and/or the classroom discipline

- Exploring with students the meaning, benefits, responsibilities and other characteristics of being a member of a community and a "global citizen"

Producers of Goods, Services and Information

- Ensuring that students apply what they learn in authentic contexts

- Planning opportunities to create discipline-related products, perform services, produce knowledge for real, meaningful audiences.

- Connecting content, skills and concepts to their real-life application

- Making interdisciplinary connections that complement what students are learning in other classes

- Exploring the tools and resources used by professionals

- Guiding students in using the tools available to them at home to facilitate their understanding of key concepts and mastery of skills within the discipline

- Connecting problem solving strategies familiar to students with habits of mind of professionals

- Prompting students to consider how they would like to share what they are learning within their local community

- Facilitating opportunities for students to apply what they are learning in the classroom to local, state, national and/or international contexts

RECOMMENDATIONS

Getting Started:

1) Teachers can consider learning tasks that link what they desire students to know, understand and be able to do with the processes and habits of mind of various professionals in related fields. Additionally, they might incorporate language that relates students and their classroom tasks to professionals and their practices. Using phrases such as, "As a [scientist, mathematician, short story writer, etc.]…" in explaining or answering questions related to assignments, may inspire students to envision themselves in various possible future roles. Teachers can do so with even more care by finding out and incorporating the careers that students may already be interested in exploring.

Moving Forward:

2) In planning a unit, link content goals to learning tasks that lead students towards thought processes and products with professional and/or real world pertinence. While considering such tasks, research and identify communities within or outside of the school who may have a genuine interest or need in the knowledge, skills or products students are developing. Contact the necessary colleagues or community members to begin to facilitate the exchange. For students who

are ready to do so, a teacher might also consider engaging students in the process of identifying people, communities,

and/or organizations with whom they would like to share and helping them to make arrangements to do so.

High Expectations, Rigor and Support

Whether or not they feel cared for can affect and influence students' responsiveness teacher instructions and classroom

assignments (DeJesús & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006; Deutsch, 2008; Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004). Additionally, the quality and

level of challenge of curriculum can be interpreted by students as indications of teacher respect and vision for their futures

(Tomlinson & Strickland, 2004). Students are more likely to confidently participate as learners in classroom processes when

teachers combine high expectations with challenging learning tasks and academic and affective support.

ANALYTIC SUMMARY

Several teachers and administrators desired African American students experience a sense of value, investment in their potential

and high expectations for their success in their own classrooms and the classrooms of their colleagues. This was reflective in

varying ways for different teachers, including deliberately examining the nature of feedback to guard against low expectations,

seeking ways to draw out student aptitudes through compelling content, and preparing students with skills useful for effectively

communicating in different settings. Several teachers also expressed valuing being accessible to and gaining the confidence of

their students. In at least one case, a teacher sought feedback from students at the end of the year to find out what would have

helped her class to learn better and how she could have more effectively met their needs. There was little evidence that it was a common practice for teachers to gather such information from students on an ongoing basis to inform their curricular and instructional choices throughout the school year.

During the majority of classroom observations, there was little to no variability in the difficulty of learning tasks in which different students were engaged. Instead, teachers seemed to vary their instructional strategies on different days with the class as a whole and to rely on student choice to provide opportunities for students to pick assignment topics about which they were interested or with which they felt most comfortable.

Additionally, there was little evidence of the use of preassessments as a way to gauge student readiness. Without differentiating learning tasks and applying methods of preassessing student understandings going into new lessons, it was highly unlikely that teachers were providing challenging learning opportunities for all of their students. While at least one teacher employed intriguing or "universal" questions to organize content, teachers generally seemed to zero in on more specific topics with very few references or connections to broader concepts or overarching principles, thereby potentially missing out on opportunities to facilitate students connecting and recalling the details from a given lesson.

Within the school, there were a variety of different attitudes towards teaching African American students. Attitudes ranged from teachers enjoying opportunities to get to know their students and believing that curriculum should reflect their cultural backgrounds and personal interests to befuddlement and frustration with students not abiding by classroom norms and interpretation of their behavior as a clear indication that they did not value learning. Alarmingly, some comments suggested concerns about colleagues perceiving some African American students as not valuing learning and/or African American students sometimes feeling as though their voices are not being heard.

Caring for students through combining **high expectations and rigor with support** looks, sounds or feels like the following:

- Maintaining high expectations for all students

- Providing thoughtful, high quality lessons

- Beginning with what the most competent students need and supporting all students in success with that level of curriculum

- Differentiating instruction in response to students' varying needs

- Organizing content through big ideas, concepts and principles

- Minimizing student idle time through providing meaningful, "go to" exercises for early finishers

- Providing scaffolding to support students having trouble with a lesson, skill or concept

- Differentiating challenge based on students' readiness levels

- Taking advantage of opportunities to grow in personal understanding of the discipline

- Finding out from students what is functioning well for them

- Expressing care for students' lives outside the classroom

- Being a consistently encouraging and constructive figure in students' lives

RECOMMENDATIONS

Getting Started:

1) Organize lessons around goals for what students are to know, understand and be able to do by the end of the unit *and* the end of each lesson. Make them visible and orally remind students what the goals are at the beginning of each class period.

2) Teachers might consider taking some time to assess their assumptions regarding which students are and are not interested in learning. Additionally, they might consider conducting periodic classroom surveys to find out what their students enjoy learning about and what types of teacher practices help them to feel cared for.

Moving Forward:

3) In addition to providing support in the form of scaffolding, teachers should also incorporate opportunities for African American and other students to pursue more challenging studies of concepts or skill sets within which they seem to thrive (or be at a higher readiness level than their peers). Conducting preassessments at the beginning of lessons could provide valuable information for informing how to provide adequate challenge to students. Considering the challenges of class

time and the variety of needs that may be present, this may entail building in activities that students can pursue on an

ongoing basis when they complete learning tasks and opportunities for more challenging exploration when presented with

topics for which they have demonstrated great proficiency and/or interest.

4) Teachers should also pursue organizing classroom content to tell larger "stories," or to address "big ideas," larger

principles or compelling questions. Introduce them at the beginning of the unit. Make them visible within the classroom

and verbally remind students of the question(s) that are most pertinent at the beginning of each class period. Return to the

question(s) frequently. Build in opportunities for students to reflect upon how the specific content and skills they are

practicing provide new information and/or tools for answering the questions. Essential questions could be especially

compelling, useful and easier to come up with as the school moves to a more interdisciplinary model for its students.

Malleability of Intelligence

When teachers believe in and help students cultivate an understanding of their intelligence as a fluid trait that grows, it can

positively affect student-teacher relationships as well as students' motivation, performance, and likelihood of making the most of

feedback and existing supports (Dweck, 2008). Additionally, for African American students, belief in the malleability of

intelligence can buffer the negative effects of involuntary student conformity to negative academic stereotypes (Aronson, Fried & Good).

ANALYTIC SUMMARY

While teacher practices varied, ongoing feedback and academic support seemed to be built into the structure of several classes observed. The format of teacher interactions included providing one-on one feedback to students during class about what they did well and what they would need to improve upon, working with students outside of normal class time to help them to understand challenging concepts or skills and engaging the class in sharing peer critiques of student presentations. Classroom seating arrangements also varied and shifted. In many cases, groups of students working together on class assignments tended to be racially diverse. Where as in some cases, grouping seemed to be based to some extent upon which students worked well together and how to meet the complexity of needs within the classroom, in several classes, students had opportunities to interact with a variety of classmates through teachers employing different grouping strategies for different tasks. Interestingly, often times, positive feedback to students seemed to be characterized by an acknowledgement of traits that they possessed or a response to correctly answering questions or completing tasks rather than an acknowledgement of the manner in which they engaged in the process. Whereas the majority of teacher participants seemed to focus on the importance of providing rich learning opportunities for students, there also seemed to be cases where teachers may have doubted students' desire to learn based upon a mismatch

between teacher expectations and student behavior within class. In some cases, teacher belief in the malleability of intelligence was a more complex construct to discern.

While it was not uncommon for teachers to provide practical feedback and/or outside of class time opportunities for students to retake examinations or receive additional tutelage, some also expressed a sense that all students are not capable of achieving the same depth of critical thought or learning goals. Whereas it is unclear the extent to which this position is helpful or harmful to the practices of the teachers that expressed it, it is possible that this may suggest that a desire to serve *all* students to the greatest extent possible may coexist with a perception of limited possibility for some students. It is also possible that a number of intersecting student characteristics related to the influence of their backgrounds and experiences could inform such a paradox. Nevertheless, there were several indications of both teacher and administrator orientations towards fixed mindsets with regard to student ability and teacher desire and capacity to meet the needs of students of color.

Caring for students through belief in the **malleability of intelligence** looks, sounds or feels like the following:

- Believing that all students can grow in intelligence and other positive character traits

- Using language with students that suggests a belief in their ability to grow

- Assuming that all students desire to learn

- Looking for creative ways to make classroom experiences more inviting to students

- Looking at teaching as a constant learning process and believing that all teachers can grow

- Using a variety of classroom seating arrangements to support students in individual and small group work

- Thoughtfully planning and using a variety of student grouping arrangements based on readiness, learning preference, interest, student choice, teacher choice, and random assignment

- Frequently providing constructive and practical feedback on student work and class participation to aid in student work towards mastery of concepts and skills

- Ensuring that students believe in their own capacity to grow

- Ensuring that all students trust that teacher believes in their capacity to grow

- Identifying students' strengths

- Enabling students to grow in their strengths and current weaknesses

- Consistently looking for creative indications of meaningful student growth

- Frequently sharing with students how they are growing

- Guiding students through periodically identifying and recording personal learning goals, measures of success, and strategies for continued growth towards mastery

RECOMMENDATIONS

Getting Started:

1) Teachers might consider reading *Whistling Vivaldi* by Claude Steele and/or other research about the prevalence and effects of stereotype threat.

2) Teachers may also consider reading Carol Dweck's *Mindset* and/or other literature related to the malleability of intelligence and take inventory of their beliefs regarding their students' and their own desire to learn and ability to grow. Additionally, teachers may reflect upon how their practices as teachers may demonstrate and/or communicate a fixed or fluidly oriented belief regarding the nature of intelligence.

3) While continually pursuing a growth mindset with regard to student capacity, teachers can deliberately incorporate language that positively recognizes student *effort* and provides thoughtful and practical feedback for student improvement.

Moving Forward:

4) Teachers can work *with* students to identify areas of growth and discuss goals and plans for continued growth in subject areas. While this was not completely absent from observations and discussions of teacher practices, it was not clear that assisting students with this practice was a widespread aspect of instruction.

5) Additionally, to equip students with transferrable habits of mind that may better equip them to combat stereotype threat, teachers can use language that describes students as "smart" cautiously, sparingly and in combination with feedback that recognizes outstanding effort and engagement with the *process* of learning.

Challenges, Resilience and Growth

Resilience is a fluid trait that can be cultivated and influenced by one's context (Olsson et al., 2003; Reis, Colbert & Hébert, 2004; Spencer et al., 2006). The presence of challenge has been linked to the cultivation of resilience (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella- Brodrick & Sawyer, 2003). When surveying the lives of creative geniuses, exceptional innovation and production has been associated with perseverance through obstacles (Dweck, 2002). Teachers can further care for their African American students by presenting opportunities to explore the relationships between challenge, resilience and growth both within their own lives and as they explore the lives of others.

ANALYTIC SUMMARY

While visuals displaying messages about persevering were displayed on some classroom walls, oral references and discussions related to growth through experience of challenge and resilience were relatively rare. When I did observe such messages, they occurred in the form of having students talk through class work problems with which they had experienced difficulty, providing instructions for how to adapt to experimental errors, and acknowledging student affective and academic difficulties or concerns

while also encouraging them to keep moving forward. Occasionally, such messages also included references to ideas of

persevering, being brave, finishing strong and the desirability of academic challenge as an opportunity for growth. Only once did

I observe the incorporation of a memoir by a young person who had endured significant challenges accompanied by specific

teacher references to the protagonist's resilience. This example could have been extended by incorporating an opportunity for

students to discuss the attributes that helped her to persevere and to reflect upon personal examples of their own growth and

resilience through challenges, exercises of which there was generally little to no indication.

Caring for students through linking **challenge and resilience to growth** looks, sounds or feels like the following:

- Insisting that all students have opportunities to engage in complex, higher order thinking

- Prompting students to reflect on both challenges and "ah-hah moments" within their learning process

- Pursuing learning and investigating content, skills and concepts *with* students

- Incorporating the biographies of diverse, men and women who have personally and/or helped others to overcome

  obstacles

- Guiding students in considering the challenges, supports and victories of diverse men and women who have contributed

  to the discipline

- Prompting students to compare their own background experiences, goals and challenges with diverse people who have excelled in the discipline

- Helping students identify positive personal attributes and sources of external support

RECOMMENDATIONS

Getting Started:

1) Build in opportunities to explore the stories of people who have demonstrated perseverance and resilience through challenging situations and have a connection to the discipline or topic of discussion. Include the voices of African Americans, adolescents, women and other people of color. Take time out to deliberately discuss how they demonstrated resilience and the outcomes of their struggles. When full-length novels, biographies and autobiographies are infeasible, teachers might consider incorporating blogs and TED-style talks as means of introducing students to the stories of others.

Moving Forward:

2) When exploring the stories of people who have experienced and persevered through challenges, build in classroom assignments that encourage students to reflect upon the specific conditions or attributes that helped them to overcome their obstacles and/or accomplish their goals. Use such writing assignments or discussions to also give students an opportunity to describe the similarities and differences to their own lives and to reflect upon the challenges, supports, resilience and indications of personal growth they have personally encountered or look forward to experiencing.

Administration
A **partnership between administrators and teachers** to **provide relevant curriculum and instruction and care** for African American students looks, sounds and feels like the following: • Developing vocabulary for discussing the role of relevance and care in student learning, identity development and academic performance • Developing a vocabulary for discussing what relevance and care look and feel like • Considering meaningful and useful curriculum and instruction and providing excellent care for students to be nonnegotiable aspects of curriculum, pedagogy and the culture of the school • Prioritizing student learning over meeting standardized testing requirements • Engaging in self-reflection about attitudes towards and means of supporting teachers • Believing that all teachers desire to learn • Believing that all teachers are capable of growing in their desire and capacity to provide relevant curriculum and instruction and care for students • Reducing stressors, clarifying misunderstandings and minimizing barriers to making relevance and care schoolwide priorities

- Providing time, training and support to teachers for engaging in self-reflection about their racial and cultural attitudes and their approaches to teaching students

- Encouraging teachers to try new ways to make curriculum more relevant for students

- Creating and using tools for assessing teacher comfort with and readiness to pursue providing culturally responsive instruction

- Constructing a mechanism for consulting students about their experiences of relevance and care in classrooms

- Fostering a sense of belongingness as members of not only the school, but also students' local communities

PRACTICAL STEPS IN MOVING FORWARD

1) Work with teachers and administrators to create a vocabulary for discussing the role of relevance and care in African American students' learning, identity development and academic performance.

2) Survey teachers to gain a sense for their comfort with, interest in and implementation of relevance and care strategies. Develop a responsive professional development plan to address teacher's varying needs for support.

3) Decide with teachers to make relevance and care for students nonnegotiable aspects of curriculum and instruction.

4) As an administrative team, devote time to reflect on personal beliefs about the nature of both intelligence and teacher capacity. Challenge personal beliefs about what teachers are and are not capable of learning (or being inspired to pursue).

5) Provide time and support for teachers to engage in self-reflection about their beliefs regarding the nature of intelligence and student capacity. Invite teachers to discuss with colleagues what they learned and how to apply what they have learned to move towards greater relevance and care in curriculum and praxis.

6) Provide time and support for teachers to engage in self-reflection about their educational, racial and cultural experiences and attitudes and how they have shaped their approaches to teaching. Invite teachers to discuss with colleagues what they have learned and how to apply what they have learned to move towards greater relevance and care in curriculum and praxis.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Relevance and care for students are better described as mindsets and approaches than isolated strategies. The following questions evolved from "zooming out" to consider all of the formal and informal information I absorbed while learning more about [School Name]. These questions are intended to inspire conversation amongst the administrative team and teachers during administrative, faculty meetings and/or professional learning community meetings regarding how to continue to pursue building the types of

mindsets and mechanisms to support deeper relevance and care for African American and, ultimately, all [School Name] students.

- **Why is it important for us to provide curriculum and instruction that are relevant and feel relevant to each/all of our students?**

- **What is the difference between caring *about* and caring *for* our students? What helps our African American students feel cared for?**

- **What tools and systems do we have in place to evaluate whether or not our curriculum and instruction are relevant to African American students and to all of our students?**

- **What tools and systems do we have in place to evaluate whether or not our African American students are being cared for, and feel that they are being cared for?**

- **Do we consider relevance and care to be priorities? How would pursuing relevance and care help our African American students meet district and state-level goals as well as prepare them for life after high school?**

- **What, if anything, makes me feel hesitant or uncomfortable about considering my students' racial and cultural backgrounds in making instructional choices?**

- **What racial or cultural experiences have influenced my attitude about and approaches to teaching and learning? To leading? Now that I know, do I need to modify my pedagogy or leadership choices?**

- **What personal educational experiences and beliefs about intelligence have influenced my approaches to teaching? The way that I think about students? About teachers? Now that I know, do I need to modify my pedagogy or leadership choices? How I think about students and/or teachers?**

- **Do I feel like I am a part of my students' communities? Am I familiar with the history, strengths and values of my students' communities?**

- **(For Administrators) How can we support and best utilize the developing expertise of Diversity Resource Teachers to benefit African American students at [School Name]?**

- **(For Administrators) What protocol exists for identifying and providing services to gifted African American students (as an underrepresented and underserved population)? Do all teachers, administrators and families have a clear understanding of the protocol and how to make the most of services available to African American students identified as gifted?**

- **(For Administrators) What resources and tools do we have in place to proactively support teachers in pursuing relevance and care?**

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Incorporate pertinent aspects of the relevance and care framework in conjunction with the school's interdisciplinary initiative.

There are key areas of the relevance and care framework that promote As the school re-conceptualizes the experiences of high school students, towards connecting their experiences in different classes, the administration of [School Name] might consider how the relevance and care framework strategies can coincide with the school's movement towards an interdisciplinary model for learning in ways that can maximize the quest for deeper meaningfulness and usefulness for African American students and the general student populations.

Survey teachers periodically to gauge their comfort with and implementation of relevance and care strategies.

The number of faculty members responding to my invitation to participate in this study suggests that there are several teachers at [School Name] who, aware of the focus of my study, were interested in learning more about the study and/or allowing me to visit their classes. Just as a preassessment can help teachers to gauge student background knowledge, surveying teachers to find out their comfort with, interest in and implementation of relevance and care strategies may protect against the need to make even well-founded assumptions regarding who is interested in providing relevant experiences for students. Data from this study suggested that a number of factors could have served as barriers to teachers pursuing curriculum and instruction that is responsive to students' racial and cultural backgrounds, including perceived lack of time, fear of treating students unfairly, not knowing how to do so and perceptions of race as being of less significance to student performance in comparison to other

background characteristics. A survey may provide administrators insight with regard to how to address such concerns or

misconceptions in ways that help teachers to feel supported and well-equipped to support their African American students.

Facilitate opportunities for teachers to build relationships with rural communities and use "place" as a point of relational and academic connection for students.

Whereas some recalled having students from several different locales, most interviewees agreed that the majority of African

American students lived in rural areas. Most teachers were able to identify factors that complicated African American students'

from rural locales opportunities to participate and excel within the classroom, including transportation from school events,

contrasting views regarding the purpose of education, differences in communication styles and expectations, and access to

technology. Considering the large number of African American students from rural locales, I would recommend both facilitating

teacher interactions within rural communities and/or providing professional development to assist with the incorporation of place

as a component of lesson plans and unit designs. This may also include hosting an event within the community to connect with

parents and/or providing assistance to teachers in identifying connections between their disciplines and the characteristics and

values of their students, students' families and their local communities.

Create a student advisory board.

While students were not participants in this study, comments from teachers and observations of student responses to learning tasks within classes suggested that they would have valuable insight to offer with regard to the classroom environments within which they feel most supported and gain the most meaningful and useful learning experiences. Data from this study suggests that, if needed, there are teachers and school personnel equipped to offer both training to students on how to effectively and respectfully express their opinions and advice to administrators regarding how to create environments within which students would feel welcome to express their insights.

Facilitate opportunities for teachers to collaborate on how to implement relevant curriculum and instruction within and outside of the classroom.

Among teachers interviewed, most described peers as one of their most valuable resources for continually learning how to serve African American students. Facilitating collaboration among teachers may include providing time during faculty meetings for teachers to work with interdisciplinary peers to plan for implementation of relevance and care strategies. Additionally, the school might consider first drawing upon the expertise of teachers who have received county-wide training and/or who are more experienced with enacting strategies for relevance and care to provide brief demonstrations, mini lessons, or simulations to colleagues, while also devising a plan to invite more teachers to practice and present their developing expertise to peers.

Survey the availability of learning opportunities experienced by students in AVID to African American students in the school's broader student population.

[Name of School] has enjoyed growth and success in its implementation of AVID, a college preparatory program that serves approximately ten percent of the total school population. Aligning with the model set forth by AVID as a national program, the primary recruitment and selection processes for participants at [Name of School] are based on factors other than race and ethnicity, focusing on students who are potential first generation college participants and/or who average grades in the academic middle (AVID, 2016). Calculations from estimates shared by school personnel suggest that African American students applying and selected to participate in the program may represent less than half of the school's total African American student population at a given time. There was little evidence to suggest that the communication training, connections between academic concepts and the local community, and peer-to-peer academic support offered by the college preparatory elective as it is implemented at [Name of School] occur commonly in general education courses. Limited time, pressure to meet testing requirements and potential gaps in teacher desires and/or readiness to implement curriculum that is responsive to the cultural backgrounds of African American students may be factors that make it difficult to do so. Nevertheless, there may be a critical percentage of African American students who would benefit from and are not receiving the guidance in developing such valuable skill sets, habits of mind and connections to the curriculum, classroom and broader community that students experience through the college preparatory program. Administrators may consider collecting data for the extent to which African American students, of all

educational backgrounds and at all levels of academic achievement, who do not participate in AVID have access to similar

support and learning opportunities. In accordance with the data collected, administrators might also prioritize strategies for

integrating some of the practices and thought processes used in AVID to reach a broader population of the school's African

American students. It would also seem useful to ensure that African American students are aware of the AVID program and its

potential benefits to them, and that they feel personally encouraged to apply to be AVID students.