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Student perceptions of teacher care:
Experiences and voices of recent high school graduates

by

Jared Rodger Smith

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Joanne Marshall, Major Professor
Dawn Bratsch-Prince
Janice Friedel
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Jan Westerman-Beatty

The student author and the program of study committee are solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was two-fold: 1) to describe, analyze, and interpret how recent high school graduates characterize the phenomenon of teacher care as they reflect upon their high school experiences, and 2) to explore how features of Noddings’ ethic of care theory compare to the elements of teacher care as described by recent high school graduates. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 20 participants between the ages of 18 and 22 were conducted. Findings revealed five activities that are consistently utilized by caring high school teachers. These activities are: 1) Providing descriptive feedback on student work; 2) Responding when students do not understand what was taught; 3) Engaging students in conversations about post-high school ambitions; 4) Displaying a positive and optimistic attitude; and 5) Honoring student interests and perspectives. Findings also revealed similarities between Noddings’ ethic of care research and participants’ perceptions of teacher care. Implications for practice, for teachers and for administrators, are included.
CHAPTER 1. OVERVIEW

Introduction

The last days of summer were winding down and I was preparing to start my first year as a high school math teacher. My first teaching job would take me far away from my quiet, Midwestern upbringing to a large, urban high school along the gulf coast in southwest Florida. Like many other beginning teachers, I went into the teaching profession with great passion and motivation for working with youth. I was confident in my abilities as a teacher, and was looking forward to working with students who shared my enthusiasm for learning.

My first couple weeks as a new teacher couldn’t have gone much better. Students entered my classroom with high levels of respect for one-another and were excited to learn about the content that I was teaching. Students enthusiastically participated in class discussions, were quick to complete classwork, and were engaged with my lessons. I had very few behavior issues in my classroom and students appeared to genuinely enjoy having class together.

Move ahead two months later. The honeymoon period with my students was long gone and I was clearly in survival mode. Student interest in my classes was in sharp decline and student behaviors were beginning to slip. Students were talking back be to me, arguing with one-another, and no longer completing the homework I assigned. Student attendance had deteriorated, as students started to come in to class well after the tardy bell had rung. I remember looking around the room after the students left for the day and thinking it looked like a war-zone had taken place within the confines of my classroom. Only a couple months on the job and I was already starting to question whether or not teaching was the right profession for me. I had been warned that my first year of teaching would be rough. However, I had no idea the level of frustration, difficulty, and exhaustion I would feel after those first couple months.
As I look back on my early years as a teacher and attempt to pinpoint how teaching went from enjoyable to discouraging in such a short time, a number of unexpected frustrations come to mind. For example, I found spending time at night to create lesson plans for the first time to be very difficult. Beyond lesson planning, re-teaching myself Algebra and Geometry concepts so that I could teach those concepts to my students took lots of time and practice. Time management was another issue for me as finding time for teaching, coaching, planning, and time for friends suddenly became difficult. Learning all of the “other things” that teachers need to do like grading, attendance, attending meetings, and the school routines took some time to figure out. Also, building relationships with other teachers on staff, many of them much older than me, was something I found to be challenging.

However, if I had to identify the one area of teaching that gave me the most frustration during my early years of teaching, I would have to say it was the behavior of my students that was the hardest to figure out. Before I move any further, I should be clear that the majority of the students in my class were meeting my expectations in terms of their general behavior and engagement with classroom tasks. However, I vividly recall struggling to connect with some – perhaps around 25 percent – of the students that took my math classes. A lack of connection meant that these students were not actively engaged in learning activities, were doing very little work outside of class, and exhibited some level of behavior concern in my classroom.

I remember going through a series of emotions in regard to who to blame for the disengagement of the students in my classroom. At times I would place blame on the students, suggesting that teenagers “these days” are lazy, don’t understand what it means to work hard, and are part of the entitlement generation. Other times I would place blame on the parents, guessing that my students were probably just modeling the poor attitude towards academics of
their parents. And finally, I would blame myself for the students in my class that refused to do anything. I quite often remember thinking that I was a bad teacher because my students weren’t behaving.

As I think back to some of the decisions I made in regard to the way I treated my students, it has occurred to me that perhaps I made some choices that were not the most effective and ultimately led to my difficulties as a novice teacher. In the paragraphs that follow, I reflect on some teaching decisions that I wish I would have handled differently. While these examples characterize only a small sample of all teaching decisions I made, it is my perception that these decisions led to some of the difficulties that I experienced.

One of the first questionable teaching decisions I made in regard to the way I treated my students was a practice I implemented as a result of one of my student teaching field experiences. During this particular field experience, I recall a cooperating-teacher who taught me the phrase, “Don’t smile until Christmas.” This old teaching adage implies teachers should begin their year as strict, uninviting individuals who maintain tight control over their students by restricting their personal, relational interactions. The intended outcome of this approach is by creating very strict levels of student behavioral expectations for the first several months of school, the teacher is able to loosen those expectations during the second part of the year. However, since the teacher exhibits tight control of the students over the first few months, the teacher can threaten returning back to the strict environment if students do not behave. I trusted the opinion of this particular teacher and remember implementing this “strategy” at times during my early years of teaching. In terms of what this looked like in my class, I would intentionally choose to distance myself from students and was careful not to over-engage myself in conversations with students. Also, I
was intentional about not showing any extraordinary optimism or emotion when around the students.

Another questionable teaching decision for how I treated my students was in regard to how I handled assignment re-dos and test make-ups. Going into my first year of teaching I did not know what my policy would be in terms of handling make-up assignments and make-up tests. Because I was unsure of the best approach, I implemented the process that was most commonly used when I was a student, which was that students were only given one chance to complete an assignment and one opportunity to take a test. Using this approach, if a student did not turn in an assignment by the given due date or had a poor grade on his or her test, I usually showed little sympathy and was unwilling to listen to what I deemed to be “excuses.” Since this approach seemed to work for me when I was a student, I assumed it should also work for my students. Finally, I recall spending little time re-teaching concepts even when students indicated they did not understand. I believed that if students did not understand the material after I had taught it once, then it was the students’ problem because they probably weren’t paying attention. Again, given that this approach worked for me as a student, I assumed it should also work for my students.

Another suspect way I treated my students was how I re-directed students when they broke the rules in my classroom. The approach I used to handle students that needed multiple redirections in my classroom was through the use of a “naughty” list. The naughty list meant that when students got into trouble during my class they would have their names written on the whiteboard. Students whose name appeared on the board would be given consequences, such as detention time or losing points on an assignment. Those students who behaved poorly even after having their name on the board would then receive a checkmark behind their name. Any student
who received a checkmark would receive a harsher punishment, such as more detention time or the loss of more points on an assignment.

Speaking of punishment, another recollection I have is how frustrated I would get with some of my classes when students in those classes would not follow my directions. I would become so frustrated with a class that would not stop talking and follow my expectations that I would yell, “If one more person talks I am going to give the whole class (enter consequence here)!” Examples of consequences I gave included having all students stay after the bell had rung, or giving all students extra problems to do on the homework assignment. A number of times I recall using this consequence for the whole class because of the actions of only a few students. When the students who were not misbehaving would question why they were getting punished, I chose to not change my decision because I did not want to show the students that I was the type of teacher that would give in to student demands.

One other questionable teaching decision I recall in regard to the way I treated students in my class was how I attempted to control student talking. I believed that if I was able to get my students to remain completely silent I was demonstrating effective classroom management. I recall during my first months on the job I tried very hard to implement group activities and other opportunities for students to work together, as I had been told collaborative learning was an effective method for teaching. However, I soon realized that when I assigned group work the class had a tendency to get loud and students tended to get more off task. To keep the class from getting loud, I pretty much stopped doing anything that would allow the students to talk. This meant eliminating most of the collaborative work in my class. Instead, I utilized lecture as my main method of instruction.
In addition to reflecting on some of the mistakes I made in regard to the way I treated large groups of students, it is also interesting to reflect upon some of the mistakes I made in regard to how I treated individual students. One individual student comes to mind that I am going to briefly discuss in the following paragraphs. Characterizing the relationship between this student and me could shed light on my struggles in terms of how I approached building relationships with some students.

Carter was a student in my sixth hour geometry class during my second year of teaching. I recall that other teachers had warned me about Carter during the days leading up to classes starting. They used terms such as “short-tempered,” “angry,” and “defiant” to describe his demeanor. They reported that Carter’s behavior in school was awful and his motivation to learn was non-existent. He was widely known by staff members as being incapable of following school and classroom expectations. I had heard that Carter rarely used class time to do work and would rather entertain his classmates than complete assignments. The other teachers recommended avoiding communication with Carter altogether, as attempting to reason with him was a “lost cause” and time would be better served focusing on working with other students in the classroom.

I recall when Carter entered my classroom for the first time. Immediately I could tell he was exactly as the other teachers had described. Carter’s personality could best be described as explosive and unapproachable. When you meet Carter for the first time you instantly notice a noticeable aura about him – something about his mature looks and his rough demeanor that not only made him intimidating to the other students but made him intimidating to me as well.

I wanted to be sure to follow the advice of the veteran teachers, so I avoided Carter as much as possible. I was careful to avoid conversations with this student, and when we were in
close proximity I pretended to be busy so that I could avoid interaction. And when I started to
see the negative impact that Carter had on his classmates, I quickly started to lose patience. I can
remember as the weeks continued and as his behavior started to deteriorate, we began having
public arguments – in front of the other students. At times I remember “allowing” Carter to get
into trouble for the sole purpose of me being able to scold him in front of his peers. I had hoped
that public shaming would convince Carter to follow my rules. However, the resentment Carter
felt as a result of this public embarrassment would only make matters worse. It got to a point
where I did not even care about Carter’s academic progress. Instead of pushing him to get better,
I was much more motivated to just get him to shut up. If fact, I was perfectly content to let him
sleep during class if he chose.

There is one day in particular that I vividly remember in regard to dealing with Carter. I
remember that the bell had rung to signal the start of class and Carter had not yet entered my
classroom. I remember hoping that Carter would not show up so that I could get a break from
having to deal with him for the day. I continued on with the lesson, keeping my proverbial
“fingers crossed” that he would not show. My optimism turned to disappointment the minute
Carter barged through the door. When he walked in I remember sarcastically asking him for a
late pass, but as was often the case he chose to ignore me. I went to the board and wrote
CARTER in letters (remember my “naughty” list) about three times larger than was necessary.
Out of the corner of my eye I could see Carter mocking me as he walked to his seat. Besides
being tardy, I also noticed Carter had also chosen to wear his trademark black hat with the white
block letters that said “DC” across the front. Despite the presence of a school policy that
indicated hats were not allowed to be warn, Carter chose to wear the hat pretty much every day
out of pure defiance. Often, Carter’s insubordination by choosing to wear the hat resulted in arguments that would result in me kicking Carter out of class.

I don’t know what it was about this particular day, but for some reason I decided that I had finally had enough with this student. With my anger now at a tipping point, I decided I needed to show this student (and the rest of my class) who was in charge. I remember going over to Carter and yanking the hat off of his head. Immediately, Carter jumped up from his desk with his fists clenched, ready to go after me. “Oh crap—what do I do now!?” I remember thinking. But I knew with the whole class watching and my pride on the line I certainly couldn’t back down from this student. I’m guessing Carter felt the same way as we both stood our ground, staring at each other, waiting for the other person to flinch…

The stories above outline some of the difficulties I experienced in terms of the way I treated some students during my first years of teaching. Although I did not realize this at that time, it appears that some of the issues I experienced may have been a result of the lack of care that I was demonstrating towards my students. Surely, anyone who has met me knows that I am indeed a very caring and compassionate person. Others would be shocked to hear me suggest that I am not a person who “cares” for my students. However, reflecting upon my early years as an educator, I’m not sure that my students knew I was a caring person. Inside my heart I knew that I cared for my students and genuinely wanted them to succeed. However, I’m not sure that the students knew how I felt. And how would they know? Beyond the examples above, I rarely went beyond surface, superficial conversations with students. Instead of working hard to get to know my students, I often found myself distancing myself from my students as opposed to being deliberate in forming relationships. Also, I found that I rarely took time to express to my
students how much I believed in them that they could be successful not only in my class but also in life in general.

This may sound contradictory, but at some point in my life I started to believe that the most common and the most effective approach to teaching was treating students with a sense of sternness and indifference. I believed this approach to teaching would create a climate in the classroom where the teacher was respected. As I think about where the need to act “tough” around students came from, a few possible explanations could be given. These areas include my personal experiences as a student, the examples of teaching I witnessed in popular culture, and also through my teacher preparation courses.

As I reflect upon the personal experiences I had with teachers during my childhood I recall a number of teachers who I perceived to be much more intimidating and scary as opposed to caring and helpful. It was my perception that many of the teachers I had growing up would prefer to teach the content of their course as opposed to building meaningful relationships with their students. I remember thinking many of the teachers I had over the span of my elementary and secondary career kept their distance from students, avoiding extra conversations and interactions with students when possible. These teachers appeared to be very knowledgeable of their content, but were far from the most outgoing, welcoming people I had ever experienced. This perception that I had was not just limited to my teachers—this included many of the staff members in the schools that I attended. Many of my school administrators also appeared to be more interested in student discipline as opposed to student care. More often than not, I remember thinking my school administrators were scary and frightening. Certainly, there were some teachers and administrators that I felt went out of their way to show they cared and with whom I had a very strong relationship. However, my perception is that the teachers who were
intentional about showing their students care were outnumbered by the teachers who were indifferent about demonstrating care for their students.

Second, I believe that popular culture also played a role in molding my thoughts in terms of a “typical” teacher’s disposition. A number of television shows and movies that I watched growing up took place in schools. Much like I had experienced in my own schooling, television and movies also appeared to depict teachers as mean and grumpy as often as they did caring and optimistic. Research also supports the notion that teachers are often depicted in television and movies as dull, ineffective, and antagonistic (Epstein, 2009; Fisher, 1997; Sandefur & Moore, 2004). As I formulate a list of movies and television shows I watched growing up that portrayed a school setting, a number of shows characterized teachers as gruff individuals that were more interested in scaring kids as opposed to caring for them. Some of the most notable examples depicting an intimidating teacher included Mr. Hand (Fast Times at Ridgemont High), Ms. Umbridge (Harry Potter), Mr. Feeny (Boy Meets World), Ms. Krabbapel (The Simpsons), Ms. Truchnbull (Matilda), and Mr. Strickland (Back to the Future). And who could forget the economics teacher from Ferris Bueller’s Day Off? While popular culture also depicts a number of “nice” teachers (e.g., Good Will Hunting, Stand and Deliver, Dead Poet’s Society) a case could be made that popular culture has portrayed teachers as controlling, fear-inducing tyrants as often as they do pleasant, awe-inspiring humanitarians.

Finally, my teacher preparation courses and student field experiences impacted my perception that being strict with little visible affection towards students was an acceptable approach to teaching. In addition to the “Don’t smile until Christmas” comment that I had heard during one field experience, I had another field experience where I was placed with a teacher who demonstrated very little outward concern for her students. From what I could tell, there
were very few examples of strong relationships between teacher and student. Instead, the teacher seemed more concerned with keeping her students as busy as possible in order to free herself up for time at her desk and away from her students. Certainly, I also had field experiences with teachers who demonstrated large amounts of care for their students. However, much like my experiences as a student and with popular culture, I received mixed signals in terms of how much care a teacher should show his or her students. Aside from my field experiences, the fact that there was very little exploration as to the importance of caring relationships in my teacher education courses only furthered my confusion about the most beneficial approach to teaching as it pertains to teacher care for students.

In addition to the experiences I have outlined describing where my misconception of a teacher’s role in student care originated, further reflection of my first few years of teaching reveals that the school administration and teacher leaders I worked with gave me very little coaching in the area of student care. While I recall receiving plenty of guidance in other pedagogical areas, teacher-student interactions and the best methods for building relationships with students received little attention. Looking back on my experiences, my perception is that it was assumed that teachers understood how to care for students, and therefore the teacher-leaders I worked for did not believe this concept needed to be taught or reinforced with teachers.

The desire to complete a dissertation on teacher-student relationships with a focus on the ethic of care was the result of looking back on these experiences and wondering what I could have done differently to avoid such frustrations during my early years of teaching. In addition to my time in the classroom, my experience as a school administrator has made it apparent that other teachers also struggle when it comes to building relationships and showing care to students. My observations suggest that many of the same mistakes I made as a classroom teacher are
occurring in the classrooms I visit every day. By exploring the role that the ethic of care plays in the high school classroom for my dissertation, my hope was that I could share my discoveries with teachers so that they can avoid the same difficulties and frustrations I had as a classroom teacher. Additionally, my hope was that I could provide guidance for other high school administrators on how to promote an ethic of care in their buildings.

**Statement of the Problem**

As I reflect on my thirteen years in education I often think back to some of the growing pains I experienced as a beginning teacher. As I think about the issues I experienced, I realize that one of the biggest mistakes I made was that I was not intentional in demonstrating care to my students for the purpose of building relationships. Certainly, I was a “caring” person and wanted what was best for my students. However, I was never aware that there were specific characteristics needed for a caring relationship to occur, as well as specific activities that teachers can implement to demonstrate student care. While I had been exposed to ideas of teacher care during both my studies as a pre-service teacher as well as during professional development at the high school where I worked, intentional steps I needed to take to demonstrate student care were not areas in which I received focused training.

For the last nine years I have served as a school administrator. My role as a teacher evaluator has given me the chance to observe a large number of teachers. I have noticed that, much like myself, a number of our teachers struggle to build meaningful, caring relationships with their students. Certainly, a large majority of the teachers I work with care for their students and want what is best for their students. However, my perception is that a number of the teachers I have supervised over the years are not conveying this sense of care to their students.
Similarly, it appears that teachers also do not understand the importance of building caring relationships with students.

Studies have explored why individuals go into the teaching profession. Research suggests a primary reason individuals go into the teaching profession is because they have a passion to work with youth (Lortie, 1975). Similarly, another primary reason why individuals go into teaching is because they have a desire to make a difference in children’s lives (Tusin, 1999). Despite having intentions for caring for youth when they enter the profession, it appears that some teachers neglect the ethic of care when working with students (Noddings, 1992).

Teachers should not necessarily be blamed for neglecting the ethic of care in their classrooms. Often it is assumed that teachers naturally know how to demonstrate care for all students. As a result of this assumption, the topic of teacher care is not usually addressed through teacher professional development (Owens & Ennis, 2005). Also, a review of the teacher education literature shows the student motivation and behavior courses in teacher-preparation programs focus primarily on behavioral objectives (e.g., student behavior expectations and the criteria for such behavior) while often ignoring the importance of ethical or intellectual aspects (e.g., understanding the root cause of student behaviors) of teaching (Beyer, 1997; Ducharme & Ducharme, 1999; Goodlad, 1990; Huebner, 1996; Stengel & Tom, 1995).

Previous studies exploring the ethic of care in the classroom have endorsed the importance of a caring approach to teaching (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Pompa, Higareda, Trevino, & Guerra, 2013; Rabin, 2008; Shafer, 2015). Whereas these previous studies collected data through the use of student surveys, classroom observations, and teacher interviews, this study used the voices of recent high school graduates to explore the ethic of care. Asking students to reflect on teacher care addressed the void in research identified by Cook-Sather (2002) who
suggests that the ethic of care is rarely approached by asking students their perspectives on the topic. In addition to filling this gap in ethic of care theory, the insights provided by recent high school graduates provide valuable guidance for high school teachers who want each student to feel cared-for in their classrooms as well as high school administrators who want to promote an ethic of care in their buildings.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative project was to describe, analyze, and interpret the role that the ethic of care played in the classroom experience of recent high school graduates. Participants were asked to reflect upon their high school experiences, focusing on their perceptions of the care they received from individual teachers. Additionally, the study compared existing ethic of care research against participant perceptions of teacher care. This study holds significance for teachers who recognize the need to promote an ethic of care within their classrooms, as well as administrators who understand the importance of all students feeling cared-for by their high school teachers.

**Research Questions**

This assessment of teacher care for students investigated the following research questions:

1. How do recent high school graduates characterize the phenomenon of teacher care (as individuals and in general) as they reflect upon their high school experiences?

2. How do features of Noddings’ ethic of care theory compare to the elements of teacher care as described by recent high school graduates?

The answers to these two research questions address the void in the literature and assist in the development of teacher strategies for improving student care in the classroom.
The field of developmental psychology is filled with differing theories that explain how individuals develop over the course of time. In searching for a theoretical framework upon which to guide this study, the researcher selected *ethic of care theory* to inform the core conceptual model for this project. Carol Gilligan (1982) was perhaps the first to discuss care theory. Gilligan approached care theory through a feminist lens, suggesting that women develop differently from men and that their moral intuitions and perspectives are also different. Gilligan suggested that when women reason about moral dilemmas, they tend to put more emphasis on care and on preserving personal relationships. While females emphasize care and relationships, males focus on abstract justice and rights (Gilligan, 1982).

Noddings (1984) expanded Gilligan’s work, applying the ethic of care theory to education. According to Noddings (1984, 1992), care theory in education maintains that the development of caring teacher-student relationships is central to supporting students’ academic achievement. One of Noddings’ most notable declarations was that caring should be at the heart of the educational system, meaning that the primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring. Noddings (1992) further asserted that “The first job of the schools is to care for our children” (p. xiv) and that by placing students at the center of the educational process they need to be nurtured and encouraged. These concepts help to serve as the foundation for the theoretical framework of the ethic of care in education.

Noddings, like Gilligan before her, also places the ethic of care within a feminist framework. Noddings suggested that the ethic of care is built upon a philosophical stance that is based on natural caring and is similar to the care that a mother has for her child. The ethic of
care emphasizes the differences between the traditional male dominated view of rules, regulations, and abstract thinking and the more feminine “motherly” voice of context that seeks connection and relationship in interactions and decision making. Similar to how women rely on care, concern, and connection in finding answers to their moral dilemmas with their own children, an individual who makes ethical decisions based on the well-being of the individual they are caring for is said to be operating from an ethic of care. The ethic of care emphasizes interpersonal relationships and collaboration, and strives to facilitate a sense of belonging. An ethic of care operating within a feminist framework advocates there is an inherent need to do what is "right" for each individual and constantly asks the questions what needs to be done and how best can this be done when caring for an individual. Feminism and feminist theory will be explained at greater length in Chapter 2.

Ethic of care theory recognizes the relationship between the caregiver and receiver, by which Noddings concludes that the caregiver and receiver enter into a mutually satisfying relationship. There are certain professions where interactions between caregiver and receiver are frequent. Examples of these professions include teaching, counseling, psychology, and social work. Individuals in these professions are expected to demonstrate and model a high degree of ethics and will be expected to unconditionally care for the others (Barrett et al., 2006). When individuals go into the profession of teaching, they assume the responsibility of caregiver to the students they serve. In the caring process, the teacher is expected to initiate the relationship and is the one who can redirect a student through this relationship. Thus, the teacher can be referred to as the “one-caring”. Alternately, the student is expected to receive and reciprocate the care he or she receives from the teacher. Therefore, the student can be referred to as the “cared-for” (Noddings, 1984).
The ethic of care theory was used as a framework to guide this study. More specifically, this dissertation focused on the role that ethic of care theory plays in education and within individual high school classrooms. The ethic of care theory will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 2.

**Significance of the Study**

Over the past several decades, scholarly work has focused on improving high schools. This work has focused on a number of topics, including raising the level of rigor in advanced courses, implementing a viable and guaranteed curriculum in every classroom, and improving methods for teacher monitoring and evaluation. However, less empirical and theoretical attention has been given to creating communities of support that promote student achievement (Louis, Murphy, and Smylie, 2014).

The positive social, emotional, and academic development of adolescents depends on whether or not schools are reliable sources of caring relationships (Noddings, 2002; Rauner 2000). Unfortunately, in today’s schools, caring is rarely placed at the center of policies and practices (Noddings 1996). Instead, educators now find themselves under pressure to increase student achievement as measured by high-stakes standardized tests (Kohn, 2000). Unfortunately, finding time for teachers to care for each student in their classroom is becoming increasingly difficult given the push teachers have been given for implementing a core curriculum as well as meeting goals set by local and state government (Louis et al., 2014).

The literature on caring in education suggests that the concept is powerful in terms of addressing the immediate needs of students. Care in education may also promote long-term outcomes of belonging and engagement, a sense of personal well-being, and academic success (Louis et al., 2014). Every action and interaction that takes place between a teacher and student
can take on qualities of caring, highlighting the importance of care in regard to teaching. However, as important as caring seems to be, its meaning in schools appears to be vague, ambiguous, and unsettled (Thompson, 1998). Additionally, little research has been conducted exploring the interactions between teachers and high school students (Allen et al., 2012).

This study contributed to the knowledge base by exploring the perceptions of recent high school graduates as they reflected upon the ethic of care they experienced in the classrooms of individual high school teachers. This dissertation compared care theory in educational research against participant perceptions of teacher care, and explored how teachers can use student perceptions of teacher care to better understand and implement the ethic of care in their classroom.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative project was to describe, analyze, and interpret the experiences of recent high school graduates as they characterized the phenomenon of teacher care. Participants were asked to reflect upon their high school experiences, focusing on their perceptions of the care they received from individual teachers. Additionally, the study compared existing ethic of care research against participant perceptions of teacher care. This study holds significance for teachers who recognize the need to promote an ethic of care within their classrooms as well as high school administrators who want to promote an ethic of care in their buildings.

Chapter 2 will present a thorough review of the literature in a number of areas related to the ethic of care in education. First, feminist theory will be explained along with an exploration of the four approaches to ethical decision making—focusing on the ethic of care. Second, characteristics needed for a caring relationship to occur, as well as activities that a teacher can
implement in the classroom to promote an ethic of care, will be identified. Classroom outcomes related to teacher care will be listed, with a specific focus on student achievement. Next, an exploration of the balance between teacher care and control will be outlined. Finally, research supporting the use of student perceptions for improving teacher practice will be explored.

Chapter 3 will outline the epistemology, theoretical perspective, and methodology chosen for this study. It will describe the selection of participants and their different characteristics and backgrounds. Subsequently, the data collection methods and the steps taken for data analysis will be presented. The chapter concludes with ethical procedures, the researcher’s positionality, and the limitations and delimitations of the study.

Chapters 4 and 5 will reveal the findings from the study, outline implications for practice for teachers and administrators, and provide the areas for future research regarding the ethic of care.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Feminist Theory**

Feminism can be described as the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men (Hawkesworth, 2006). Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical discourse (Worell & Johnson, 1997). Though many descriptions of feminist theory have been presented, basic principles such as valuing women and their experiences, identifying conditions that oppress women, changing society through advocacy, and recognizing the many factors that affect a woman’s actions and views help to characterize the philosophy (McCormick & Bunting, 2002). Feminist theory offers a perspective for understanding human behavior in the social environment by centering women and issues that women face in contemporary society (Lay & Daley, 2008) and also reflects a world view that values women and that confronts injustices based on gender (Chinn & Wheeler, 1985). While feminist theory has significant background in both the United States and in Western Europe, this dissertation focuses primarily on the events that occurred within the United States.

Contemporary feminist historians distinguish three “waves” or time periods that help to outline the history of feminism. The first wave refers to the feminist movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the first wave, previously unaffiliated works of literature and unorganized protest in support of women’s rights gave way to formalized political organizations and activist groups supporting women’s rights (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The first wave of the feminist movement is highlighted by the numerous landmark events that occurred during the time period, which led to women gaining rights that their male counterparts already possessed. Examples of these events included the Seneca Falls Convention (1848), which discussed the social, civil, and religious rights of women and the Married Women’s Property Act
(1884), which gave women the right to own property, enter into contracts, and earn a salary separate from their husbands. In addition to these events, many other organizations with the purpose of advocating for women’s rights were formed during the first wave of the feminist movement. Organizations focused their efforts on attaining suffrage for women, giving women easier access to education, and fighting for better workplace conditions for women. The first wave of feminism is considered to have ended with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (1919), which granted women the right to vote (DuBois, 1999).

The second wave of feminism refers to a shorter period of time—beginning in the early 1960s and lasting through the 1980s. Second-wave feminism continued the work of the first wave with the focus on matters of equality, with a particular focus on ending gender discrimination in all aspects of society, most notably in the areas of education and in the workplace (Hanisch, 1969). Another focus of the feminist movement during the second wave was the battle against female oppression, which is defined as the unjust treatment or control of women (Bell, 1984). Those individuals that searched to end female oppression during the second wave of feminism primarily focused their efforts on making education equally as accessible to women as men, ending the economic and wage disparity between males and females, and eliminating unequal political rights (such as not being allowed to run for office) for women (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2000).

The third wave of feminism arose as recently as the early 1990s. The shift from the second to the third wave of the feminist movement occurred when many of the legal and institutional rights identified during the second wave were granted to women. Similar to the first and second waves, the third wave of the feminist movement was again highlighted by a number of landmark events where women were given more rights. The Violence Against Women Act
(1994), which recognized the severity of violence against women and strengthened federal penalties against those who committed crimes against women, as well as the Glass Ceiling Act (1995), which introduced the elimination of barriers inhibiting female advancement in the workplace, both occurred during the third wave of the feminist movement. In addition to these institutional gains, advocates of the feminist movement during the third wave believed further changes needed to occur in regard to the stereotypes, media portrayals, and language that were used to define women. While all three waves are characterized as having a focus on women empowerment, those supporting the feminist movement during the third wave strongly urged women to be proud of their own, individual identities and beliefs and pushed women to reach for personal goals while realizing their full potential (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010).

**Feminist theory in education**

Recent developments in feminism have focused on different types of feminism, as feminism has evolved in different arenas rather than as one unified concept. The labels that define those arenas have become varied, with a number of separate feminist theories commonly used. Examples of these subsets of feminist theory include black feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism, lesbian feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, materialist feminism, and socialist feminism (Andermahr, Lovell, & Wolkowitz, 1997; Evans, 1995).

In addition to these subsets of feminist theory, the feminist movement has also evolved within the educational arena. Jane Roland Martin (1970; 1981; 1982; 1985) discussed her philosophy of education through a feminist perspective. Reflecting on the school-focused research she conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Martin noticed a number of inadequacies in regard to how females were treated in the area of educational research. For example, Martin noted the absence of discussions by or about women in educational research,
suggesting that most of the research done by women on the topic of education was ignored. She further contended that work about women’s education and women’s education of the young were largely neglected. Furthermore, Martin (1999) suggested that the very definition of education according to the standard texts in educational philosophy exclude women. She explained how women were often disregarded, distorted, and devalued in terms of educational thought, and challenged future researchers to study scholarship through a coeducational lens.

The discrepancies in gender and education brought to life through Martin’s work have influenced other feminist researchers to explore the role of feminism in education. Carol Gilligan (1984) used the feminist lens to explore how teachers go about making decisions in the classroom. Described as making a decision through an ethic of care, Gilligan focused her work on gender differences in moral reasoning between boys and girls. Gilligan suggested that women tend to make decisions based on relationships and responsibilities while men tend to make decisions based on rules and rights. Gilligan asserted that a woman approaches decision making through an ethic of care while a man approaches decision making through an ethic of justice. A number of other feminist theorists (Beck, 1994; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Ginsberg, Shapiro, & Brown, 2004; Grogan, 1996; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Noddings, 1992, 2002; Sernak, 1998; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2012; Tronto, 1993) have discussed the ethic of care for moral decision making. Ethical decision making and the ethic of care will be discussed at greater length in the following section.

**Ethical Decision Making**

The average teacher makes around 1,500 teaching decisions a day that will impact the learning of his or her students (Shavelson, 1983). Some of the most important decisions teachers make in regard to students involve ethical classroom dilemmas (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2012). A
number of teacher decisions fall under the definition of an ethical dilemma. Depending on the context of the situation, sample topics of ethical dilemmas a teacher may face include addressing student behaviors, reacting to parental demands, accommodating students with learning disabilities, preparing for standardized testing, determining approaches to student grading, using social media, and exploring religious and theological topics.

As teachers continue to encounter and make decisions based upon a greater number of student issues in the classroom (Willis, 2006), society has come to expect teachers to make sound ethical decisions, while also making ethical decisions that are in the best interest of the student (Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Starratt, 1994). Given the complexities of the student issues which teachers are expected to attend, decisions that meet the expectations of parents, administration, and students can be difficult (Roubanis, Garner, & Purcell, 2008).

Within ethical decision making, four ethical perspectives have been developed to help explain how individuals may go about making ethical decisions: ethic of justice, ethic of critique, ethic of care, and ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2012). Each area of ethical decision making from the teacher’s perspective is explored below.

**Ethic of justice**

Justice serves as the foundation for legal principles and ideals, rights and laws, fairness and equity in individual freedom (Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2012; Starratt, 1994; Stefkovich & O’Brien, 2004). According to Starratt, the idea of fairness and equal treatment became the core values of the ethic of justice (1994). Kidder (1995) suggested this approach to making decisions as “rules based thinking” (p. 24). The ethic of justice requires treating others to a standard of justice—or holding individuals accountable to the rules that have been put into place. Similarly, the perspective of justice endorses the notion that equal treatment
of all individuals according to a standard which is uniformly applied is an appropriate means to achieving a just, equitable, and fair society (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2012). In addition, authors affirm that the ethic of justice supports the principle of due process and protects the civil and human rights of all individuals (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2012; Strike, Holler, & Soltis, 1998).

When teachers approach an ethical dilemma in the classroom with an ethic of justice approach they may ask the following questions in an attempt to solve the dilemma: Are there any policies, rules, or procedures that are in place in my classroom, in the building, or in the district that can help me to make a decision? If there is a policy, rule, or procedure in place, does it need to be enforced? If there is not a policy, rule, or procedure in place, should there be one? Are there any legal obligations that I need to consider when making a decision?

**Ethic of critique**

Many philosophers are not convinced by the type of logic and rationale promoted in the ethic of justice (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2003; Greene, 1988). Those who operate from an ethic of critique assess the laws and the social processes through which these laws are brought to fruition and explore whether or not the rules are appropriate. Rather than accept the words of those in power, the ethic of critique seeks to question and challenge the status quo seeking to redefine and reframe the important issues that revolve around social inequities. Just as the ethic of justice is about fairness, the focus of the ethic of critique is about the barriers to fairness (Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2012; Starratt, 1994). This ethic is based on critical theory, which stresses the reflective assessments and critique of society. The ethic of critique is concerned with issues of oppression, privilege, authority, voice, language, and empowerment. Often, those operating under an ethic of critique will question who has the power and wealth, and who does not.
When teachers approach an ethical dilemma in the classroom with an ethic of critique approach they may ask the following questions in an attempt to solve the dilemma: Are the policies, rules, or procedures that are in place in my classroom, in the building, or in the district appropriate in this case? Who made the policies, rules, or procedures? Who benefits from the policies, rules, or procedures? How long ago were the policies, rules, or procedures made? Above all, should the policies, rules, or procedures be followed in this situation?

**Ethic of care**

With its focus on care, concern, and connection, the ethic of care promotes nurturing, care-giving, and encouragement (Noddings, 2005). Embedded in the ethic of care is an inherent need to do what is "right" for each individual student, as opposed to making a decision based on policy or rule (ethic of justice) or based on whether or not the decision is fair for all students (ethic of critique). The ethic of care emphasizes interpersonal relationships and collaboration over competition, and strives to facilitate a sense of belonging. An individual who operates under the ethic of care may question who will benefit from a decision and who may be hurt as a result of the decision. The ethic of care values loyalty and uses trust as a fundamental trait for improving quality of life for the individual, family, and community.

When teachers approach an ethical dilemma in the classroom with an ethic of care approach they may ask the following questions in an attempt to solve or the dilemma: Who will be helped by my decision? Who will be hurt by my decision? How can I make certain that the long-term consequences of my determination are good? What about the unintended consequences of my decision? If I am helped by someone now, what should I do in the future about giving back to this individual?
Ethic of the profession

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2012) suggested that the ethical frameworks of justice, critique, and care needed expanding, as some ethical decisions that teachers face could be approached from all three perspectives. As a result, Shapiro and Stefkovich introduced the ethic of profession. The authors called for teachers and school leaders to consider professional codes and standards of the educational profession when grappling with an ethical dilemma. Similar to the ethic of care, this model places the best interests of the student at the heart of the ethics of the educational profession (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007; Stefkovich & O’Brien, 2004). The ethic of profession suggests that since teachers are in a position of power and responsibility over students in their classrooms, teachers must utilize ethical and moral decision making as it pertains to the teaching profession (Fenstermacher, 1990).

When teachers approach an ethical dilemma in the classroom with an ethic of the profession approach they should determine what is in the best interests of the student. Once the best interest of the student is explored, the teacher also determines what decision would be in the best interest of the staff. In addition, the teacher should ask if the decision will blend in well with their own personal and professional ethical beliefs, and also determine if the decision will match the professional ethical beliefs of the building and district.

This dissertation focused on the ethic of care and the importance of teacher care in the classroom. By choosing to focus on the ethic of care, it was not the intent of the author to suggest the ethics of justice, critique, and professions do not have their place in the classroom. In fact, the ethic of profession was introduced because of the importance that all three ethical stances (justice, critique, and care) can have in different classroom scenarios (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2012). Instead, the purpose of this dissertation was to add to the existing literature
on the ethic of care, and to determine the role that the ethic of care plays in the high school classroom. While it has been suggested that a teacher simply cannot effectively teach without the ethic of care (Owens & Ennis, 2005), this dissertation used the perceptions of recent high school graduates to explore such assertions of teacher care.

**Natural Caring vs. Ethical Caring**

Noddings (1984) characterizes what it means to care by identifying two types of caring—natural caring and ethical caring. *Natural caring* occurs when an individual is greatly involved or invested with another person and feels joy when helping the other. In natural caring situations, an individual acts on behalf of another person because that individual wants to do so (Noddings, 2013). Often, natural caring involves some level of self-sacrifice where the needs of the individual being cared-for are placed before the needs of the one-caring. The most common example of natural caring is a mother caring for a child. Other examples of natural caring typically involve the care between an individual and his or her family member or an individual and a very close friend (Noddings, 1984).

One characteristic of someone who demonstrates natural caring is acceptance. Acceptance means that an individual who exhibits natural caring does not attempt to control the cared-for, but rather the one-caring allows the cared-for to pursue his or her own personal interests. Another characteristic of someone who demonstrates natural caring is someone who is able to refrain from making judgments about the cared-for. Instead of making judgments, someone who demonstrates natural caring embraces the unique differences the cared-for may possess.

The second type of care is *ethical caring*. Ethical caring requires an effort that is not needed in natural caring, and can be identified as caring that is done out of duty as opposed to
attachment (Noddings, 2013). Ethical caring occurs when an individual recalls from their past a memory of being cared-for, and the joy that they felt when they were cared-for by someone else. As a result of recalling how meaningful the experience of being cared-for was for the individual, that person is then able to make the conscious, ethical decision to care for another person (Noddings, 1984). An example of ethical caring is a teacher who demonstrates care for a student. Although a teacher may not necessarily want to care for a student (see natural caring), the teacher should feel the ethical need to care for the student given their profession. As was previously discussed, other examples of professions where ethical caring is a requirement of the job could include the fields of counseling, psychology, and social work.

The ethical desire for the teacher to care for a student may stem from the teacher recalling from his or her own childhood a parent who demonstrated natural caring (Noddings, 1984). Because the teacher is able to recognize the importance of the natural caring they received, the teacher may consciously make the choice to show ethical caring for a student. Thus, it could be said that ethical caring is dependent upon, but not superior to, natural caring. It is also important to note that ethical caring must be practiced, involving effort on behalf of the individual giving the care.

While natural caring is typically characterized as the natural inclination an individual feels to care for a family member or relative, there are times when teachers feel compelled to care for particular students. Reasons why teachers may feel compelled to naturally care for some students as opposed to others varies greatly by teacher, but often natural caring by teachers for a certain student is the result of the teacher feeling sympathy for the student (Noddings, 1984). Sympathy for a student may occur because the teacher feels badly for a student’s misfortunes,
the teacher recognizes that he or she and the student share mutual interests, or the teacher realizes that he or she and the student have encountered similar life experiences.

Noddings (1984) emphasizes that both natural caring and ethical caring are examples of relationships because they both require that the individual being cared-for sends a response to the one-caring as a means of acknowledging that the care has been received and is valued. It should be noted that while the person providing care in a relationship is important, the person in a relationship receiving the care is equally as important because without some sort of response from the person receiving the care, the relationship is broken. Noddings (1984) suggests that the proper response to care establishes the proper conditions for caring, meaning that there is an ethical demand for the one-caring to demonstrate care, and also for the cared-for to respond to the care. An example of a response in a natural caring relationship could be a baby boy smiling at his mother after his mother demonstrates care with a kiss or hug. An example of a response in an ethical caring relationship could be a student who tells the teacher “thanks for listening” after the teacher takes time after class to listen to the difficulties a student may be having with a peer.

**The Ethic of Care in Teaching**

A caring relationship can be defined as a connection or encounter between two human beings. Within a caring relationship, there is a reciprocal exchange between two individuals. Within the classroom, the reciprocal exchange occurs between teacher and student, with the teacher assuming the role of the one-caring and the student assuming the role of the cared-for (Noddings, 1984). In this process, the teacher initiates the relationship and is the one who can redirect a student through this relationship. A student who reciprocates the care from the teacher is what allows the relationship to begin (Noddings, 1984). Without a response on the part of the
student, we cannot say that a caring relationship exists, as the reciprocal exchange of caring between teacher and student confirms the relationship.

Teachers who profess an ethic of care in their practice view themselves as the ones responsible for empowering their students. The ethic of care suggests that teachers take a proactive approach to addressing the needs of their students, using the perspective of “I must do something” as opposed to the more reactive perspective of “something must be done.” Teachers operating under the ethic of care are motivated to intentionally and purposefully demonstrate care to their students, while teachers that operate without this philosophy leave student care up to others while removing themselves from personal responsibility.

It should be emphasized that an ethic of care is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and likeable (Owens & Ennis, 2005). Caring implies a continuous search for competence. When teachers operate using an ethic of care, they want to do the very best for their students. Some students may need a teacher who is sensitive and delicate at all times when dealing with a student. Other students may need a teacher who demonstrates tough love by holding the student responsible for his or her actions. Teachers that operate through an ethic of care are intentional about getting to know their students so that they know which approach—“warm and fuzzy” or tough love—works best for an individual student (Noddings, 1992).

**Characteristics of Care**

For a teacher and a student to establish a relationship that operates under an ethic of care, specific characteristics need to be present (Owens & Ennis, 2005). While caring relationships are complex and involve a number of features, there are three characteristics that all ethically caring relationships must have: engrossment, commitment, and a motivational shift (Noddings, 1984). These characteristics are explained in the following paragraphs.
Engrossment

The first characteristic that needs to be present for a caring relationship to develop between teacher and student is engrossment. *Engrossment* occurs when the teacher establishes a caring relationship by paying close attention to the needs of the student and acknowledges student feelings and the relevance of student experiences. Students have identified engrossment as a core element of teacher care and appear to be particularly aware of whether or not the teacher is paying attention to them (Alder, 2002). Students are receptive to the teacher when they feel included and when they realize the teacher values their feelings. The receptiveness of the teacher to intentionally focus efforts towards attending to the individual needs of students maintains and enhances the ethic of care relationship. Without focusing on a student’s need to be accepted and valued, it is difficult for a teacher to understand that student in a deep and genuine way (Noddings, 2005).

Commitment

*Commitment* requires dedication to the relationship, even in difficult times, by both the one-caring teacher and the cared-for student (Hamington & Sander-Staudt, 2011). A caring teacher practices inclusion of all student ideas, seeking to understand and accept each student’s feelings. Additionally, a caring teacher committed to a relationship will persistently seek involvement from the student. When a teacher attempts to elicit genuine and meaningful communication with a student, the teacher is operating under an ethic of care (Noddings, 1992). Examples of genuine communication between teacher and student include spending time getting to know one another, exchanging feedback on teaching and learning styles, as well as understanding each other’s preferences and sources of motivation.
A relationship built on an ethic of care is enhanced when a student realizes a teacher is committed to meet his or her individual needs as well as committed to accept each student regardless of his or her shortcomings. When the student realizes the teacher is committed to the relationship, it is important the student also demonstrates commitment to the relationship. A student can demonstrate his or her commitment to the relationship by engaging in conversation with the teacher, actively participating in classroom activities, and demonstrating respect for the rules and expectations the teacher has in his or her classroom.

**Motivational shift**

In addition to engrossment and commitment, the third characteristic of care needed for a relationship to develop between teacher and student is motivational shift (Noddings, 1996). Also referred to as motivational displacement, *motivational shift* requires teachers to shift their attention from their own needs to meeting the individual needs of the students in the classroom (Noddings, 1984). The motivational shift of caring occurs as the teacher removes his or her own desires and instead views the world through the eyes of his or her students. For example, instead of focusing all class time teaching course content for the purpose of meeting department or curriculum deadlines, a caring teacher should also be cognizant about using class time to address individual student needs that arise during the class period. By assuming the perspective of the student, the teacher is able to determine what motivates his or her students. When a teacher is able to determine what motivates a student, the teacher is able to better help a student reach his or her goals, as well as determine how the subject matter being taught may connect to a student’s life.
Activities of a Caring Teacher

Noddings (1984) suggests that one of the most important things that students can learn from their teachers is how to interact with other individuals. Given the importance of a teacher’s interactions, each teacher must be intentional in appropriately modeling the ethic of care to his or her students through the use of several activities. Whereas the previous section outlined the specific characteristics needed for a relationship to occur, activities of a caring teacher are specific actions teachers can take to demonstrate care to their students. These activities include modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. These activities are explained in the following paragraphs:

Modeling

Modeling can be defined as the enactment of behaviors that indicate to another that one is a caring person (Noddings, 1984). Modeling provides teachers with the opportunity to demonstrate how to care through the relationships they form with their own students as well as their colleagues. Although caring teachers may tell students what care should look like, a more effective method for teaching caring involves a teacher modeling to his or her students what care looks like. As a student watches a caring teacher interact with other students and staff, the student begins to better understand characteristics of caring.

Teachers modeling the ethic of care should be explicit in referencing both personal examples as well as classroom examples that highlight the importance of offering care to other individuals (Noddings, 1984). A personal example could involve the teacher modeling care through his or her interactions with all students. When a student sees the teacher interact with other students using respect and kindness, the student witnessing the interaction begins to realize how he or she should interact in a caring relationship. Other personal examples could include a
student witnessing a teacher modeling care in his or her interactions other teachers, support staff, and parents.

A classroom example of modeling could be an activity where students move around the room and get to know each other. A teacher modeling care could explain to the students that when everyone gets to know one another this helps students understand similarities and differences in others, thus promoting feelings of care. The teacher can further model caring by taking part in the activity themselves, moving around the room and interacting with the students for the purpose of getting to know the students better.

Dialogue

Dialogue is said to be at the core of the reciprocal caring process between the one-caring and the cared-for (Noddings, 1992). *Dialogue* consists of a teacher talking, listening, sharing, and responding to his or her students. Dialogue can also be described as engaged listening and sharing of histories (Diekelmann, 1990). Dialogue in a caring classroom involves teachers and students exchanging ideas and understandings with one another, allowing teachers and students to interact and collaborate when making decisions, thus contributing to the development of classroom relationships. By using dialogue to better understand their students, teachers are able to better anticipate and respond to student needs within the classroom (Noddings, 1992).

An example of a teacher being intentional in his or her implementation of dialogue for the purpose of promoting an ethic of care in the classroom could occur after the teacher gives an assessment. If a large percentage of students were to do poorly on a test, a teacher may look to facilitate a student discussion where students are encouraged to have open dialogue on the results of the assessment. The teacher may encourage discussion about why the students felt like they
did so poorly, and the teacher may elicit feedback on how he or she could teacher the content in a way that would produce better results.

Another option for dialogue could be the teacher encouraging a discussion with the students on what it feels like to experience failure. Furthermore, the teacher could ask students to have dialogue where other incidents of failure are discussed. By having this open-ended conversation, a student may realize he or she shares a common understanding or emotion with someone else in the classroom. A teacher who allows for the sharing of common experiences enhances the relationships within the classroom (Noddings, 1996).

Practice

Caring teachers also provide opportunities for students to practice care – educational activities that foster cooperation and sharing as a means for expanding students’ abilities to receive and to give care (Siccardi & Iseminger, 2008). Through practice, students’ attitudes and ways of thinking are shaped by the experience in terms of how they view the world in regard to their capacity to care. Noddings (1992) explains that when teachers provide opportunities for students to practice care, students not only learn how to care, they also are able to see how their contribution adds to the classroom community.

One example of practicing care could be when students are allowed to work collaboratively with others in their class on a project or assignment. When a caring teacher sets up collaborative groups, he or she may establish behavior expectations for the group, as well as assign defined roles and responsibilities to group members. Another example of practicing care could involve student mentoring, where high school students are given an opportunity to serve as mentors to middle school children as a part of an after-school program. Not only would this example of practicing care give high school students a chance to care for younger children, the
opportunity to mentor younger students would also allow the high school students to model appropriate behaviors and attitudes of care that were demonstrated to them by their high school teachers.

**Confirmation**

A teacher who operates through an ethic of care also uses *confirmation*, defined as an act of affirming and encouraging the best in others. A teacher who uses confirmation offers the student support and guidance without taking away from the student’s independence. Confirmation includes constructive feedback as well as positive comments when the student is doing something well (Siccardi & Iseminger, 2008). For confirmation to be received by the student, the teacher must first get to know the student well enough to realize the goals of the student (Noddings, 1992). A student’s responsiveness to the care of a teacher allows trust between the two to develop. Once the student begins to trust the teacher, the student begins the process of sharing his or her aspirations with the teacher. When teachers operate through an ethic of care, they are able to identify potential in each of the students in their classroom, regardless of a student’s prior classroom history and personal background (Noddings, 1992). Additionally, it is important for a teacher operating under an ethic of care to remember when a student does commit a harmful or uncaring act, the teacher must nevertheless respond by giving the student the benefit of the doubt by assuming the student was using the best possible motive given the situation.

An example of confirmation in the classroom could involve goal setting. When a teacher commits time to work one-on-one with a student to identify the personal goals of the student, the teacher is confirming the student by helping the student to realize his or her potential. Long-term goals discussed during student goal setting could include post-secondary plans and career
aspirations. Other short-term goals in the areas of academics, athletics, and friendships could also be discussed during a goal-setting session between teacher and student. Additionally, it is important to note for confirmation to occur, a caring teacher must remember to accept and encourage individual student differences during the goal setting process.

**Care and Student Achievement**

One of the primary outcomes of students in the classroom of a teacher who operates under an ethic of care is improved student achievement (Bartell, 2011). An exploration of the research on student achievement results in a number of similar, yet imprecise, definitions of the term. According to Ferguson et al. (2008), student achievement is a student’s knowledge and preparedness for future endeavors as determined by assessments at the state, national, and international levels. Similarly, Kane and Staiger (2011) propose that student achievement measures a subset of a body of skills or knowledge through the use of a standardized assessment. Finally, Cunningham (2012) suggests student achievement to a student’s performance on achievement tests (e.g., SAT, ACT, NAEP) in areas of reading, writing, math, and science. Summarizing these definitions, and for the purpose of this project, student achievement can be characterized as a student’s performance at a given point in time on a formal assessment that measures mastery of a skill or skills that are perceived as necessary for educational advancement.

Goldstein (1999) argues that caring relationships are a central part of a student’s intellectual growth and development. She contends that a teacher’s ability to understand what motivates a student for the purpose of maximizing a student’s chance at academic success is a key aspect of a caring relationship. In short, student achievement and caring are inextricably linked to one-another (Bartell, 2011). One of the ways a teacher can help influence a student’s academic achievement is by understanding a student’s relationship to the subject matter for the
purpose of extending the student’s knowledge (Noddings, 1992). When a teacher takes the time to understand a student’s previously demonstrated reasoning on a concept, the teacher can appropriately choose problems that will support the student’s learning (Hackenberg, 2010). Supporting students academically includes learning how to help students use prior skills to learn new ones (Cochran-Smith, 1999) as well as meeting students where they are in terms of learning the content to help students participate meaningfully in the knowledge development process (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Caring relationships are also academic in that teachers expect and demand academic excellence from all of their students (Bartell, 2011).

Vasquez’s (1988) characterization of a teacher as a “warm demander” helps to illustrate the notion that learning and caring are entwined. He characterized a warm demander as a teacher who does not lower academic standards for students but also will reach out to students and provide needed assistance in order for students to reach high standards. Similarly, Kleinfeld’s (1972) work suggests caring teachers demand academic excellence from their students. Kleinfeld suggests a teacher should first build a warm and personal relationship with a student. Once the teacher has built the relationship with the student, the teacher can then actively demand a level of academic work which the student does not suspect he or she can attain. By first building a strong relationship with a student, the student interprets the teacher’s demandingness not as bossiness or hostility. Rather, the student interprets a teacher’s actions as an expression of personal concern, eliciting a high level of intellectual performance as the student feels obliged to meet the teacher academic standards (Kleinfeld, 1972).

Additional Outcomes of Teacher Care

In addition to increased student achievement, a number of other student outcomes are positively influenced by teacher care. Cornelius-White (2007) identified a number of student
outcomes that are positively affected by teachers who operate under an ethic of care. In addition to increased student achievement, he found above average associations between teacher care and improved critical and creative thinking, increased classroom participation, reduced drop-out rates, enhanced self-esteem, improved student grades, a reduction in disruptive student behavior, and increased student attendance.

Noddings (1992) found that teachers who operate through an ethic of care could influence student motivation. *Motivation* has been described as a process that includes a teacher-using directive and stimulating properties that can lead students to peaked interest in a subject and promotes instigative behaviors from the student (Brophy, 1996; Dweck, 1986). When the teacher has created student interest, the teacher is able to give direction and purpose to the student, and is able to lead the student to make preferred choices on academic work and behavior. Noddings’ connection between teacher care and student motivation has since been supported by other research (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1996; Davis, 2003; Wentzel, 1997). Furthermore, Erwin (2003) suggested that when students are motivated in the classroom as a result of teacher care, classroom attentiveness, classroom participation, and student achievement are improved.

Finally, Goldstein (1999) suggested that teachers who use an ethic of care in the classroom positively affect classroom culture. *Classroom culture* can be defined as shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between students and teachers within a classroom (Haynes, Emmons, Gebreyesus, & Ben-Avie, 1996). Culture is recognized as an important component of successful classrooms and has been linked to increases in student achievement scores (Griffith, 1999). Similarly, another outcome of teacher care is a student’s sense of belonging and engagement within the classroom (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, &
Schaps, 1995; Riley et al., 2006). Student engagement can be defined as the attention, interest, investment, and effort students expend in the work of learning (Marks, 2000), and is achievable when the teacher creates a welcoming environment built on collaboration and trust (Newmann, 1992). High levels of student engagement in the classroom have been positively correlated to increases in student achievement (Kidwell, 2010; Klem & Connell, 2004).

**Balancing Care and Control**

Gomez, Allen, and Clinton (2004) suggest that caring relationships in the classroom are premised upon having a reciprocal relationship between a teacher and his or her students. Reciprocal exchanges between teacher and students entail that the teacher and students are continually developing, negotiating, and maintaining a social connection. Teachers that are able to positively navigate these interactions have a good chance of establishing an ethic of care in the classroom.

While reciprocal exchanges between teacher and students are crucial for developing the teacher-student relationship, a teacher’s commitment to building emotional connections with students may result in tension between teacher and students (Muller & Perret-Clermont, 1999). These relational tensions can include issues of conflict and power-struggle between teachers and students (Cothran & Ennis, 1997). At times, teachers who focus primarily on building caring relationships with their students neglect other aspects of teaching such as using classroom management strategies. Teachers who focus solely on student care may ignore defining student behavior expectations and holding students accountable to behavior expectations (Schlechty & Atwood, 1977). Furthermore, when a teacher allows students to do what they want and is simply too “nice” to their students, other aspects of teaching are neglected and could result in the teacher losing control of the classroom environment (McLaughlin, 1991).
To better understand the importance of a teacher being able to balance teacher care and teacher control of students in the classroom, the following paragraphs highlight research that speak to this challenging dichotomy.

Dominance and cooperation

Wubbels, Brekelmans, van Tartwijk, and Admiral (1999) explored care and control in the classroom. The purpose of their research was to give teachers feedback on the best way to balance care and control for the purpose of creating caring relationships resulting in high levels of student learning. The result of their work contends the optimal approach to teacher-student interaction is to blend appropriate levels of dominance and cooperation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Interaction Between Dominance and Cooperation. Adapted from “Interpersonal Relationships Between Teachers and Students in the Classroom,” by T. Wubbels, M. Brekelmans, J. Van Tartwijk, and W. Admiraal, 1999, New Directions for Teaching Practice and Research, p. 153.
In contrast to its more negative connotation suggesting forceful control or command over others, *dominance* in this model is characterized as a teacher’s ability to provide clear purpose and strong guidance regarding both academics and student behavior (Wubbels et al., 1999). Teachers can exhibit appropriate dominance by establishing clear behavior expectations and learning goals by exhibiting assertive behavior. However, teachers must be sure to avoid extreme dominance in the way they handle their classes, which can be characterized as a lack of attentiveness to and concern for the interest of the students (Marzano et al., 2003). The other end of the spectrum is extreme submission which can be characterized as teachers who demonstrate a lack of clarity and purpose in terms of content delivery and behavior expectations.

Whereas dominance focuses on the teacher as the driving force in the classroom, cooperation focuses on the students and teacher functioning as a team. *Cooperation* is characterized by the desire of teachers to meet the individual and collective needs of the students in their classes. Just as teachers can communicate appropriate levels of dominance by providing clear learning goals, they can also convey appropriate levels of cooperation by providing flexible learning goals. However, teachers must avoid extreme cooperation which can be characterized as an inability to act without the input and approval from the students. On the opposite end of the spectrum is extreme opposition, which can be characterized by a teacher’s active antagonism toward students and a desire to prevent students from achieving their goals.

Given these definitions of dominance and cooperation, a teacher who balances appropriate dominance and appropriate cooperation creates the optimal classroom environment for student learning (Marzano et al., 2003). High school teachers that are able to balance dominance and cooperation have 21 percent less student-created disruptions as compared to other high school classrooms. Given the extensive research linking classroom environment to
student achievement (e.g., Brophy, 1996; Hattie, 2003; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993) it could be stated that a teacher who is able to appropriately blend dominance and cooperation in the classroom positively influences student academic outcomes for his or her students.

Confronting-Contracting

The work of Chiu and Tulley (1997) also sought to characterize the ideal balance of care and control. Their study on student preference of teaching approaches asked students to choose from three options in terms of their preference for how a teacher approaches classroom management and relationships.

The first option presented to students was a rules/rewards-punishments approach to teaching. This method was characterized as teachers who clearly articulate rules and procedures, with little input from their students. In this approach, students acting in accordance with the rules are given positive rewards while those who do not act in accordance with the rules are given negative consequences. This approach is often referred to as a teacher-dominated approach, where the teacher dictates much of the learning without extensive amounts of negotiation between teacher and student (Chiu & Tulley, 1997). The “naughty list” described in the introduction of this dissertation is an example of this rules/rewards-punishments approach to teaching.

The second option presented to students was a relationship-listening approach to teaching. This method was characterized as a teacher who places his or her full attention attending to students’ concerns with little or no emphasis on disciplinary issues. In this approach, students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions. As opposed to the rules/rewards-punishments approach which is teacher dominated, the relationship-listening approach is a student-dominated approach to classroom learning (Chiu & Tulley, 1997).
The third approach to teaching presented to students was the *confronting-contracting* approach. This approach was characterized as a teacher who cares about each student’s needs and preferences and also attends to disciplinary problems within the classroom. This teacher assigns negative consequences for inappropriate behavior, but does so in a way that is flexible and meets the needs of individual students in the classroom.

Chiu and Tulley’s findings resulted in students identifying a preference for the confronting-contracting approach to teacher-student interactions (1997). In fact, the percentage of students who preferred an approach where the teacher demonstrated levels of care as well as control was more than double the number of students who chose one of the other two approaches. Students indicated preference for a teacher who worked at building interpersonal relationships by initiating constant interaction with students for the purpose of arriving at classroom decisions collaboratively. Once classroom decisions are made, students indicated appreciation for a teacher who follows through on decisions and holds other students accountable when they do not follow decisions that were made (Chiu & Tulley, 1997).

**Orderly/Enabling**

Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) also explored the ideal learning environment for student learning. They identified four types of learning environments typically seen in classrooms, with each of the learning environments reflecting a balance between care and control (2010).

The first type of learning environment is a *dysfunctional* classroom. These classrooms are characterized by the teacher constantly struggling to maintain order. Typical of these classrooms is a teacher who has not defined classroom rules or expectations. Teachers in dysfunctional classrooms show a high concern for pleasing students as opposed to setting clear expectations. Eventually, the teacher in this classroom is more focused on controlling the
behaviors of students as opposed to academic work. These classrooms are often chaotic, with little sustained learning occurring in these classrooms (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

The next type of learning environment is an adequate classroom. Adequate classrooms are characterized as having more classroom control by the teacher as compared to dysfunctional classrooms, but there still exists a continuing struggle between teacher and students over order. Teachers in these classrooms attempt to build relationships with students, but without strategic methods for building relationships, high levels of student motivation to meet the expectations of the teacher are not realized. In these classrooms, some academic work takes place, but the number of distractions is frequent (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

An orderly/restrictive classroom was the next type of classroom. These learning environments are typically viewed as “tight-ship” classrooms. In these classrooms, the teacher maintains a high degree of structure and manages his or her routines tightly. Teachers in these classrooms usually implement a narrow range of instructional strategies, meaning that most of the time they utilize lecture or other instructional strategies that limit student interaction. Additionally, these teachers show minimal amounts of care towards their students or regard for building relationships.

Orderly/Enabling was the last type of classroom identified in the research, and is identified as the most effective learning environment for student learning (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Orderly/Enabling learning environments have a defined structure with clear process and expectations. Teachers in these classrooms utilize a wide range of instructional strategies for the purpose of meeting the diverse needs of the students in the classroom. While teachers in these classes emphasize structure, they also demonstrate enough flexibility to accommodate individual
student needs. When the teacher meets the needs of the students in the classroom, the students reciprocate their appreciation through care for the teacher.

All three of these ideas—balancing dominance and cooperation, confronting-contracting teaching approaches, and orderly/enabling classrooms—highlight the importance of a teacher being able to balance care and control in the classroom. While finding the right balance between care and control can be a challenge for teachers, when teachers do achieve the perfect blend in their classroom the results can be substantial. The topic of balancing care and control will be explored later in this dissertation.

**Connection before correction**

Before finishing the section on teacher care and control it is important to cover the concept of connection before correction. When a teacher demonstrates care and is able to build a relationship with a student, the teacher is also said to have built a *connection* with the student (McCombs & Miller, 1997). Talking informally with students about their interests, greeting students as they enter the classroom, and complimenting students on achievements are just a few of the many examples of how teachers may go about building a connection with a student. When a student feels a connection with his or her teacher, the student will respond more positively to teacher redirection, or *correction* (Nelsen, 2011). Likewise, when a student feels they have a connection or a relationship with the teacher they are more likely to work in collaboration with the teacher and encourage others in the class to follow the expectations set by the teacher. Alternately, when a teacher does not have a relationship built with the student, the student is more likely to respond negatively to teacher redirection (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2006).

To help illustrate what might happen when a teacher attempts to correct a student without connection, recall the story about Carter from the introduction of this dissertation. In this story,
the author was warned to “avoid communication with Carter altogether” because attempting to build a relationship with this student had proven to be more harmful than beneficial. Following the advice of the other teachers, the author decided to avoid interaction with the student except when the student needed to be reprimanded for poor behavior. It could be suggested that since the author had not connected with Carter before attempting correction, the author experienced formidable pushback from the student. Certainly, it should not be understated that Carter presented unique behavior challenges that even the most seasoned teachers struggled to manage. However, attempting connection before correction may have given the author a better chance at successfully redirecting the student as compared to the lack of success the author ultimately experienced.

Student Perceptions

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the role that the ethic of care played in the classroom experience of recent high school graduates as they discussed their high school experiences. Given that the data collected in this dissertation, as well as the resulting implications and recommendations for practice, came from students who recently experienced the ethic of care phenomenon, understanding the research supporting the validity of student perceptions is important.

Student perceptions could provide valuable insight for teachers, as a number of studies suggest that aspects of teaching can be improved when teachers listen and react to student feedback (Aldridge, Fraser, & Ntuli, 2009; Konings, Brand-Gruwel, & van Merrienboer, 2010; UNESCO, 2012; Vermetten, Vermunt, & Lodewijks, 2002). Furthermore, many researchers have suggested that investigating students’ perceptions of their learning environment could result in more engaged learning experiences and higher student achievement for students (Gates, 2012;
McCombs & Miller, 2007; UNESCO, 2012). Finally, listening to students’ perceptions of their learning environment and responding to their feedback can influence behavioral and academic outcomes of students (Aldridge, Fraser, Bell, & Dorman, 2012; Allen & Fraser, 2007; Fraser, 2012; McCollum & Yoder, 2011).

Despite extensive evidence supporting the use of student perceptions for the purpose of improving teacher practice, there appears to be a lack of current research asking students their perceptions of preferred methods of teaching when it comes to the topic of teacher care. Hubbard (2001) criticized current research for a lack of focus on student perceptions of teacher practices and behaviors, noting that educators and researchers were “reluctant to ask students what they think” (p. 15). Hubbard also notes that students are most affected by teacher practices in the classroom, yet few studies target the perceptions of students in their learning environments (2001). Additionally, Good and Weinstein (1986) argued that schools should elicit student perceptions regarding classroom practices, suggesting that little attention has been given to the ideas and interests of students. This study contributed to the field of research on the ethic of care in the classroom by exploring recent high school graduates’ perceptions of teacher care.

**Summary**

Research points to a need for additional understanding on the topic of the ethic of care in the high school classroom. Despite research suggesting teacher care positively affects a number of student outcomes, it appears that some teachers neglect the ethic of care when making classroom decisions. By describing, analyzing, and interpreting how recent high school graduates characterized the phenomenon of teacher care as they reflect upon their high school experiences, this study helps high school teachers who are searching for strategies that will
promote an ethic of care within their classrooms. This study also provides guidance for high school administrators who are looking for ways to promote the ethic of care within their buildings.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative project was to explore the role that the ethic of care played in the classroom experience of recent high school graduates. Participants were asked to reflect upon their high school experiences, focusing on their perceptions of the care they received from individual teachers. This study holds significance for high school teachers who are searching for strategies that promote an ethic of care within their classrooms, as well as high school administrators who are looking to advocate the ethic of care in their buildings.

Qualitative Approach

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study. Twenty recent high school graduates served as participants for this research. Each participant took part in an individual, in-depth interview. During each interview, the participant was asked to describe the teacher care he or she experienced from individual high school teachers.

A qualitative approach was appropriate for this research given the focus on participant perceptions of teacher care. Whereas quantitative research creates barriers to understanding perceptive experiences of participants such as feelings and thought processes, a qualitative approach serves as the lens into such phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

The data collected from participant interviews helped the researcher answer the following research questions:

1. How do recent high school graduates characterize the phenomenon of teacher care (as individuals and in general) as they reflect upon their high school experiences?
2. How do features of Noddings’ ethic of care theory compare to the elements of teacher care as described by recent high school graduates?
A qualitative researcher must pay attention to the interdependence of four particular elements of the research design and carefully construct the scaffolding of the study to ensure congruence (Crotty, 1998). These four elements include: epistemology – the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective; theoretical perspective – the philosophical stance informing the methodology; methodology – the strategy behind the choice and use of particular methods; and methods – the techniques used to gather and analyze data.

Crotty (1998) proposed a visual representation to show how these four elements inform one another. Understanding how these four elements work together and inform one another is important as it builds a theoretical foundation and historical context for the reader (see Figure 2). This chapter presents each of these components in relation to this study.

![Figure 2. Crotty’s Framework. Adapted from The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process (p. 4) by M. Crotty, 1998, New York: Sage.](image)

**Epistemology**

Constructivism served as the epistemological framework for this study. *Constructivism* suggests that individuals construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through
their experiences and reflecting upon those experiences (Piaget, 2013). Similarly, a constructivist approach also declares that each person constructs meaning in different ways even when experiencing similar events (Crotty, 1998). The recent high school graduates who participated in this study have experienced the ethic of care in the classroom, with each participant interpreting what it meant to be cared-for by a high school teacher.

An objectivist approach would not have been appropriate for this study. The objectivist approach states that reality exists apart from consciousness (Crotty, 1998). The individual does not make meaning out of experience; the meaning exists independent of the individual (Cox, 2012). Using an objectivist epistemology, the participants would not have been able to make meaning out of their high school experiences because the approach suggests that the subjects should strive not to include their feelings and values. Given the particular interest in how participants constructed their own meaning in relation to the phenomenon of teacher care, the constructivist approach was selected.

**Theoretical Perspective**

Ethic of care theory provided the theoretical perspective that guided this study. Ethic of care theory contends that the development of caring teacher–student relationships is central to supporting students’ academic achievement (Noddings, 1984). The ethic of care falls within a feminist framework, building a philosophical stance that is based on natural caring and is similar to the care that a mother has for her child. Similar to how women might rely on care, concern, and connection in finding answers to their moral dilemmas with their own children, an individual who makes ethical decisions based on the well-being of the individual he or she is caring for is said to be operating from an ethic of care.
Ethic of care theory recognizes the relationship between the one-caring (teacher) and the cared-for (student). In the caring process, the teacher is expected to initiate the relationship and is the one who can redirect a student through this relationship. Caring requires both the teacher and the student to contribute to the formation of a caring relationship. A student must reciprocate the care being received from the teacher to allow the relationship to begin. The ethic of care emphasizes interpersonal relationships and collaboration, and strives to facilitate a sense of belonging (Noddings, 1984).

The ethic of care perspective was selected because of the prominent role that teacher care plays in the development of adolescents (Noddings, 1984). Ethic of care theory suggests that caring should be at the heart of the educational system. This dissertation followed similar educational studies that used the ethic of care as a theoretical framework (e.g., Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Rabin, 2008; Shafer, 2015). Of particular interest to this study was how recent high school graduates interpreted the care they received from their former high school teachers. Participants were asked to characterize the role that teacher care played in their individual classroom experiences. Participant insights were analyzed and interpreted for the purpose of helping teachers promote an ethic of care in their classrooms.

**Methodology**

The methodology for this study was phenomenological research. *Phenomenology* is a design of inquiry in which the researcher interprets the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology asks participants to return to a particular experience in order for the researcher to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for reflection (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological studies search for
themes and subthemes that capture the meaning communicated by the participants and express meaning in participants’ lives (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

Participant interviews were the method for collecting data in this dissertation. Whereas ethnographies and case studies typically rely on multiple methods of gathering data, interviews are the primary source for collecting data in phenomenological studies (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In regard to data analysis, phenomenological studies typically ask the researcher to search for themes and subthemes that capture the meaning communicated by the participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). This dissertation followed similar phenomenological steps as the researcher completed the data analysis process. The approach to data analysis used in this project will be described later in this chapter.

**Pilot Study**

Yin (2011) recommended the use of pilot studies as a way “to develop relevant lines of questions” prior to conducting the actual study and to assist with the process of refining data collection plans and procedures (p. 92). The researcher completed a pilot study as a part of a required graduate dissertation course. The purpose of the pilot study was to explore the phenomenon of teacher-student interactions through the experiences of recent high school graduates. This pilot study used a qualitative approach and involved the use of six participants that took part in one-hour interviews.

The pilot study provided valuable insight for the researcher that allowed him to be better-prepared to complete this dissertation. One example where the pilot study gave the researcher valuable insight into completing research was that the researcher learned how all of the different sections of a doctoral-level research paper are ordered, structured, and fit together. Second, the pilot study allowed the researcher to develop interview skills. Examples of the interview skills
that were developed include the best way to sequence questions, how to most effectively prompt participants to answer questions, and also how to pace the questions so that the interview would last a desired amount of time.

The pilot study explored recent high school graduate perceptions of teacher-student interactions. The original plan of the researcher was that the dissertation would share this same conceptual focus. However, during the preliminary oral presentation where the researcher shared findings of the pilot study with his dissertation committee, the general consensus of the committee was that focus of the project needed to be slightly altered. The committee provided two reasons why the projected needed a change in focus. First, the dissertation committee believed the topic of teacher-student interactions was too broad and lacked specific focus. Second, the dissertation committee did not believe the topic of teacher-student interactions was grounded and supported by enough theoretical research.

As the committee and the researcher discussed next steps for the dissertation, focus quickly shifted to the topic of the ethic of care. Both the committee and the researcher agreed that the ethic of care emerged as a major theme of the pilot study findings. Beyond the committee meeting, an exploration by the researcher comparing the topics of teacher-student interactions and teacher care revealed a number of similarities. The researcher noticed that many of the qualities of effective teacher-student interactions involved aspects of teacher care. After further conversation between researcher and the committee chair, the decision was made to shift from the broad focus of teacher-student interactions to a more specific focus on the ethic of care.

As the project shifted in focus from teacher-student interactions to the ethic of care it was important that all aspects of the research project reflected this change. One area that reflected the change from pilot study to dissertation was the research questions. Whereas the pilot study
used research questions focused on teacher-student interactions, this dissertation was driven by two research questions that focus on the ethic of care. Furthermore, once the research questions were established, it was important that the interview questions were changed to reflect tight alignment with the project’s newly-developed research questions. Given that the interviews were the source of data collection used to help construct the participants’ perspectives regarding the ethic of care in the classroom, it was imperative that the interview questions were carefully cross-referenced to the study’s research questions. Table 1 presents the reader with the two research questions that served as the foundation on which the subsequent interview questions were designed. The full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) How do recent high school graduates characterize the phenomenon of teacher care (as individuals and in general) as they reflect upon their high school experiences?</td>
<td>1, 2a, 2c, 2e, 3a, 3c, 3e, 4, 5a, 5c, 5e, 6a, 6c, 6e, 7, 7a, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) How do features of Noddings’ ethic of care theory compare to the elements of teacher care as described by recent high school graduates?</td>
<td>2b, 2di, 2dii, 2diii, 2div, 3b, 3di, 3dii, 3diii, 3div, 5b, 5di, 5dii, 5iii, 5div, 6b, 6di, 6dii, 6div</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the shift in focus of the project, other smaller changes occurred as a result of the pilot study experience. One of the changes that occurred during the pilot study project was the age range of participants. The original intent of the researcher was to interview high school students for both the pilot study and the dissertation. The thought behind interviewing high school students was that those individuals would be ideal participants given they are currently experiencing the phenomenon of teacher care. However, during the early stages of the pilot
project the researcher realized there could be unintended consequences of interviewing students that currently attend high school. One unintended consequence of interviewing current high school students could be if students were to negatively describe current teachers, there could be potential psychological risks to the child for exposing teacher deficiencies. Another unintended consequence of interviewing current high school students could be if the teacher being described in the research was identified by the reader, there is some concern that the teacher may take retribution on the student as a result of being negatively described. Given these concerns, the researcher switched gears and interviewed students that had already graduated high school for both the pilot project and the dissertation. More information on the participant selection process will be explained in the Participants section below.

Another change for this dissertation as a result of the pilot study was the number of participant interview questions. The pilot study interview included 11 open-ended questions. The intent of the researcher was that the 11 questions would provide approximately 60 minutes of interview dialogue. However, the researcher overestimated how long participants would be able to describe their high school interactions, as all participants produced much less than 60 minutes-worth of dialogue when responding to the 11 questions. The lack of response from the participants resulted in the researcher having to continuously prompt the participants to keep giving thoughts and responses. To compensate for this miscalculation in time allotted for interviews, the dissertation interviews were scripted for 12 primary questions with 41 follow-up questions. Additionally, the interviews were designed to be flexible with questions that can be added or altered depending on the flow of the conversation.

Another change as a result of the pilot study was the total number of participants who took part in interviews. During the pilot project the researcher completed individual interviews
with six participants. While six participant interviews served as a solid introduction for the researcher into qualitative research, the researcher believed an increase in the number of participant interviews would generate more perspectives on the topic of teacher care and therefore increase the validity and the generalizability of the study. To broaden the scope of this research, this dissertation included individual interviews with 20 participants. The 20 participant interviews resulted in clearer patterns of data and better-articulated participant themes as compared to the pilot project.

One last difference between the pilot study and this dissertation was that this dissertation used a ten-minute introduction period to start each interview. During the pilot study, instead of immediately starting the interview questions, the researcher found that each interview required ten minutes-worth of general conversation between researcher and participant in order to make the participant feel comfortable prior to the start of the interview. As a result, the dissertation interviews explicitly assigned a ten-minute introduction before starting with the regular interview questions. Total interview time was also increased, with interviews lasting between one and two hours. The increase in interview time was reflective of the increase in the number of questions that were asked of participants.

**Participants**

The selection of participants for this research study was driven by *purposeful sampling*. When obtaining a purposeful sample, the researcher selects a participant according to the needs of the study (Morse, 1991). Categories such as age, gender, status, or role in an organization may serve as starting points for purposeful sampling (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). As was previously mentioned, this study required that participants were between the age of 18 and 22. The rationale for excluding current high school students from participating was explained in the
previous section. Conversely, the dissertation excluded participants older than 22 years old. The rationale behind this decision was that individuals between the ages of 18 and 22 might have more accurate recollections of their high school experiences and be better able to articulate their teacher-care experiences. This is not to say that individuals older than 22 no longer have vivid memories of the care they experienced from high school teachers. However, recall that the researcher originally planned to interview high school students due to their current immersion in the teacher-care phenomenon. Once it was determined that interviewing high school students would not be feasible, the researcher believed an age range of 18 to 22 would be most useful for this project.

In addition to purposeful sampling, considering that participants were asked to reach out to the researcher and volunteer their time, a type of purposeful sampling called convenience sampling can also be used to describe this sampling approach (Patton, 1990). *Convenience sampling* is defined as sampling techniques used by qualitative researchers involving selecting individuals that happen to be available and are willing to participate at the time (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

To find volunteers to participate in this study, recruitment flyers (Appendix A) were posted around the campus of the University of Northern Iowa. The University of Northern Iowa has an enrollment of around 12,000 students and is located in Cedar Falls, Iowa. Volunteers were asked to contact the researcher either by cell phone or by email to set up an interview. All interviews took place at the Rod Library, which is centrally located on the University of Northern Iowa campus. The first 20 individuals who responded to the recruitment flyer were used as participants for this project. All 20 of the individuals who responded to the flyers completed interviews. Therefore, no additional volunteers were needed for the study.
Data Collection Methods

The data collection methods used for this research study involved in-person interviews with recent high school graduates. Before interviews began, each participant was introduced to the study and guided through the Informed Consent Document (Appendix B). Once each participant agreed to the requirements of the study and signed the document, the researcher moved into some introductory questions before each interview began. The interview protocol (Appendix C) included 12 primary questions along with 41 follow-up questions. Although each interview was estimated to last between one and two hours, none of the interviews lasted longer than 90 minutes.

Yin (2011) outlined a number of features that are typical of qualitative interviews. Three of those features played a major role in the interview process selected for this research. First, the relationship between the participants and researcher was not strictly scripted. The Interview Protocol provided the researcher a general outline to follow during each interview, but the phrasing of the questions, the phrasing of the probing questions, and even the order of questions were slightly altered according to the flow of each of the conversations. Second, the interviews followed a conversational manner rather than a scripted approach. Topics such as the summer plans, college courses, and personal interests filtered into some of the discussions, allowing each interview to be individualized to the participant and providing a more social relationship. Third, the interviews contained open-ended questions that prompted participants to provide deep, rich descriptions instead of single-word answers.

Interviews were collected on a whole-disk encrypted, password protected laptop computer. A talk-to-text program called Google Voice Typing was used to collect interview transcripts. After the second interview, the researcher determined that a back-up method for
collecting interview dialogue was also needed in the event that the talk-to-text program did not translate portions of each interview. A voice recording of each interview through the use of a phone application called Voice Recorder was used in addition to the Google Voice Typing talk-to-text program for the remainder of the interviews.

Following each interview, the transcript generated through the Google Voice Typing program was immediately uploaded to a “cloud-based” website. Once uploaded to this website, the original transcript was deleted. Before leaving, the participant was asked to supply the researcher with his or her email address. The participant was informed they would be emailed an updated transcript that included pseudonyms that have replaced participant names. Participant email addresses were stored securely and did not appear in any other location, including elsewhere in the research. Once this process was explained to the participant, he or she was allowed to leave.

The next step for the researcher was to access the transcript on the cloud-based website and compare the uploaded transcript against the voice recording. The researcher edited the transcript as needed to ensure it reflected what was actually said during the interview. Pauses, stammering, and filler words such as “um,” “like,” and “OK” were generally not included. Additionally, the researcher replaced participant names with pseudonyms. Once this was done, a link to the revised transcript document was emailed directly to the participant. This link allowed the participant to access the interview transcript. Accompanying the link was information encouraging participants to look over the transcript to make sure they were comfortable with the information included in the transcript (Appendix D). If there was a portion of the interview the participant no longer wanted included in the final product, they were asked to contact the
researcher by email with the sections of the transcript they would like edited or deleted and those pieces of transcript data would be deleted.

If the participant did not contact the researcher within three weeks of receiving the email with the interview transcript, another follow-up email was sent to the participant asking if he or she would like to request changes (Appendix E). Participants were given two more weeks to respond to the researcher. If after two weeks of receiving the follow-up email the participant had still not responded it was assumed any contents of the original transcript may be used for the final product. Sophia was the only participant who provided modifications to the original transcript. Her changes consisted of additional dialogue that she wanted added to the responses she provided during the interview.

Data Analysis

After the required amount of time allowing participants to make changes to their transcripts had passed, two separate data analysis procedures were completed. The first comprehensive round of data analysis addressed the first research question: How do recent high school graduates characterize the phenomenon of teacher care (as individuals and in general) as they reflect upon their high school experiences? The second comprehensive round of data analysis addressed the second research question: How do features of Noddings’ ethic of care theory compare to the elements of teacher care as described by recent high school graduates?

To answer the first research question, a system similar to the categorical aggregation approach (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 2013) was used to sift through transcripts. The first step of the categorical aggregation approach included identifying key phrases and sentences from the transcripts where participants discussed specific instances of teacher care. The focus of this step was to identify participant dialogue that captured the emotion and feelings of participants when
they characterized the teacher-care phenomenon. Understanding how students constructed meaning from the care they received from their teachers was a fundamental piece of the data analysis process.

Following identification of key participant phrases, these pieces of data were inserted into a data-analysis spreadsheet document. Next to key participant phrases, tentative codes (Creswell, 2013) were assigned that summarized the transcript data. After those identified lines of transcript were interpreted, another re-read through the tentative codes comparing them to the transcript text was completed to ensure accuracy of the tentative code assignment. Upon completion of the second re-read, the information was sorted according to tentative code by using the custom sort spreadsheet function. Sorting of the data using the spreadsheet function allowed for a visual to develop in which patterns were easy to identify. The clustering together of tentative codes resulted in common codes or patterns (Creswell, 2013). All pulled transcript data and assigned patterns were transferred into a separate document called the Compiled Participant Data Analysis Document.

Once the data (including transcript data, tentative code, and pattern) was translated into the Compiled Participant Data Analysis Document, a third analysis occurred. The purpose of this last analysis was to combine the patterns that were similar to one another, as well as to remove any patterns that did not show up enough times relative to the other patterns. The patterns that remained became themes (Creswell, 2013). The themes that emerged from this first round of data analysis are described in Chapter 4.

To answer the second research question, a slightly different data analysis approach was used. Whereas the first round of data analysis looked for general themes that emerged across all interviews in terms of participants’ characterization of teacher care, the second round of data
analysis compared participant responses against Noddings’ characteristics of care and activities of a caring teacher (Noddings, 1984). The first step of the second round of data analysis involved collecting all participant responses to interview questions specifically addressing Noddings’ research (see Table 1) and organizing those responses together. Next, all other participant responses that alluded to Noddings’ research independent of interview questions specifically addressing Noddings’ research were grouped according to the Characteristic or Activity described by the participant. Once all participant dialogue pertaining to Noddings’ work was grouped together, another analysis of the data occurred. The purpose of this analysis was to determine whether or not participants’ most caring teachers exhibited characteristics and utilized activities that reflect Noddings’ research. Further information describing this second round of data analysis, as well as the results that emerged during this second round of data analysis, are described in Chapter 4.

**Ethics**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Office for Responsible Research at Iowa State University approved the application for this study on July 22, 2016. IRB paperwork that was filed explained that when participants agreed to take part in an interview, they would have to complete the Informed Consent Document. The Informed Consent Document described the ethical concerns that arose with this project, along with the measures that took place to mitigate the ethical concerns. Participants were reminded that the form needed to be signed before the interview took place.

In this study participants were asked to disclose potentially negative experiences or relations with their former high school teachers. This led to some feelings of discomfort or uneasiness for participants. Some students had connections to former teachers, and therefore
were nervous about speaking poorly about former teachers. However, participants were reminded of the measures that this study took to ensure that their stories remain confidential.

Participants were reminded that pseudonyms were used for all participants of the study. Specific student descriptors which could have allowed readers to determine who was being described were not included. Examples of these specific student descriptors not given in the final product included specific physical characteristics and specific high school accomplishments. At no time was the name of the school the student attended mentioned in the final product.

Participants were asked not to share names of the teachers they described in their interviews. Specific teacher descriptors which could have possibly allowed the audience to determine who was being described were not given in the final product. Examples of these specific teacher descriptors not included in the final work included specific physical characteristics, teaching accomplishments, and exact number of years of teaching. At no time was the name of the school where the teacher worked mentioned in the final product.

Finally, participants were assured that the researcher has worked in education and with students for over twelve years and is very familiar with the school setting and characteristics of students and teachers. The researcher’s background and knowledge of students and teachers allowed him to use judgment when determining which descriptors could be used to describe participants and teachers with minimal chance of being identified.

**Researcher Positionality**

Merriam (2002) suggested that a researcher should also consider whether the design is a comfortable match with his or her worldview, personality, and skills. My work as a school administrator and my motivation to have these research questions answered as a means of
informing my own professional development aligns with Merriam’s philosophy. The experiences I encountered during my early years in the classroom have produced a more-developed understanding of the importance of a teacher operating under an ethic of care in the classroom.

I have spent the last nine years as an administrator at the high school and the middle school level. My access to situations that arise in the classroom because of my role as an administrator has allowed me to gain first-hand information on hundreds of scenarios involving the ethic of care within the classroom from the perspectives of the student and the teacher. These experiences have made it apparent that the ethic of care plays an important role in classroom outcomes. Coaching teachers on how to go about implementing an ethic of care in the high school classroom is one of the fundamental roles of my job; therefore, this project was highly motivating for me and has allowed me to improve my professional practice.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This study was limited to the perceptions of the individuals who participated in this study regarding their experiences of teacher care. This study did not examine how the teacher perceived the relationship that he or she experienced with a particular student. Similarly, this study did not examine how other students in the classroom or other observers characterized the caring relationship between teacher and student.

Data that reflected homogeneous participant demographics presented three more limitations in this study. The first limitation was in regards to the locations where participants attended high school. Of the 20 participants who took part in this interview, 19 of the participants attended high school in the Midwest. The second limitation was that 16 of the 20 participants were Caucasian. The third limitation was that 15 of the 20 participants indicated
they were above average as compared to their high school peers in terms of academic achievement. The experiences of teacher care for the individuals who participated in this research study may differ as compared to participants from other geographic locations, ethnicities, and academic backgrounds and therefore limit the generalizability of this research.

This qualitative study was delimited to individuals between the ages of 18 and 22 that happened to see and respond to the recruitment flyer. The data was delimited to the data generated from the 20 participants. The experiences of the students that were interviewed could be different as compared to students from other backgrounds.

Finally, self-selection bias should also be considered. Given that participants were allowed to decide for themselves whether or not they wanted to participate in the research, participants may have had some inherent bias in terms of their perceptions of teacher care. For example, some participants may have chosen to participate because they are aspiring teachers and the topic of teacher care is of interest to them. Another example could have been that some participants had very poor experiences with teacher care in high school and therefore were determined to share those experiences. As a result of the self-selective sampling used in this research, there is a chance this research reflects biased data, and the respondents who participated might not represent the entire target population.

Summary

This chapter presented the epistemology, theoretical perspective, and methodology for this qualitative study. Next, the participants, the data collection methods, and the steps taken for data analysis were discussed. Finally, ethical procedures, researcher positionality, and limitations and delimitations of the study were explored.
CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to explore the role that the ethic of care played in the classroom experience of recent high school graduates. Twenty participants between the ages of 18 and 22 years of age were asked to take part in individual interviews where they reflected upon their high school experiences, focusing on their perceptions of the care they received from individual teachers. In addition to characterizing the phenomenon of teacher care, this study was also designed to compare existing ethic of care research against participant perceptions of teacher care.

This chapter begins with a series of brief profiles about the interview participants. Next, the findings and emergent themes associated with the first research question will be provided. After the first research question is explored, findings and participant dialogue connected to the second research question will be presented. Finally, consideration of disconfirming evidence will be provided.

Participant Profiles

Twenty participants between the ages of 18 and 22 volunteered to take part in individual interviews. Brief descriptions of each participant are found in the following paragraphs. Pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant for the sake of confidentiality.

Alyssa. Alyssa is a 22-year-old Caucasian student who just started her fourth year at the University of Northern Iowa. She grew up in a small suburban Iowa community and attended a high school with over 1,200 students. Alyssa explained that she had a very strong academic record, graduating toward the top of her class in terms of grade point average. She explained that she was involved in a large number of activities while in high school, including softball, choir, and drama. Despite being involved in extracurricular groups, Alyssa indicated that she
had no friends in high school. When asked to describe herself in high school, Alyssa described herself as “socially awkward” and that she never had a desire to be overly social. Alyssa is currently pursuing a degree in business.

**Anthony.** Anthony is a 20-year-old African American college student who just began his third year at the University of Northern Iowa. Anthony grew up in a large urban Iowa community and attended a high school with more than 1,000 students. He explained that he was a strong student academically, graduating toward the top of his class in terms of grade point average. Anthony said that he was involved in both basketball and student government while in high school. When asked to describe himself in high school, Anthony said that when he started high school he was very quiet; however, toward the end of high school he “broke out of his shell.” Eventually, Anthony explained he was one of the more “popular” students in his class. Anthony is currently pursuing a degree in business.

**Brittany.** Brittany is an 18-year-old Caucasian college student who just began her first year at the University of Northern Iowa. She grew up in a small suburban Iowa community and attended a high school with more than 1,500 students. Brittany explained that she was an “average” student academically, graduating toward the middle of her class in terms of grade point average. Brittany mentioned that she was involved in a number of activities while in high school, including volleyball, track and field, and choir. When asked to describe herself in high school, Brittany said she was a “social butterfly” and always tried to make the most of her high school experiences. Brittany is planning on pursuing a degree in education.

**Bryan.** Bryan is a 22-year-old Caucasian college student who just started his fourth year at the University of Northern Iowa. He grew up in an urban Iowa community and attended a
Catholic high school with just over 500 students. Bryan explained that he graduated in the upper third of his class in terms of grade point average. Bryan indicated that he was involved in activities such as football, basketball, baseball and a number of volunteer organizations. When asked to describe himself in high school, he said that he was very outgoing and very busy, especially at the end of his high school career. Near the end of his high school career, Bryan indicated that he became one of the more “popular” students in his high school. Bryan is currently pursuing a degree in political science.

**Chloe.** Chloe is a 20-year-old Caucasian student who just recently transferred to the University of Northern Iowa from a local community college. Chloe’s family moved frequently as she grew up, which resulted in her attending a number of different schools. Chloe eventually graduated from an alternative high school in Washington with around 200 students. In terms of academics, Chloe indicated that she started her high school career off as a below-average high school student in terms of academics, but then eventually was able to turn things around and graduate. Chloe explained that she did not participate in any high school activities. When asked to describe herself in high school, Chloe said that she enjoyed the outdoors. Also, she discussed how the birth of her child took up a lot of her time. Chloe is currently pursuing a degree in social work.

**Courtney.** Courtney is a 21-year-old Caucasian student who just started her third year at the University of Northern Iowa. Courtney grew up in a rural Iowa community, just outside of a larger city. Courtney attended a suburban high school with just over 600 students. In terms of academics, she explained that she graduated within the top 10 percent of students in her class based on grade point average. Courtney indicated that she was involved in a number of high school activities, including cheerleading, soccer, and other organizations. When asked to
describe herself in high school, she said that she was kind of quiet and reserved despite being a cheerleader, but did have friends in a number of different social groups. Courtney is currently pursuing a degree in elementary education.

**Daniel.** Daniel is a 19-year-old Caucasian student who just began his second year at the University of Northern Iowa. Daniel grew up in a suburban Iowa city and attended a high school with over 1,500 students. Daniel indicated that he was an above-average high school student academically as compared to his peers, but said at times he did not try his hardest to get top grades. Daniel mentioned that he was very involved with sports in high school, running in cross-country and track as well as participating in wrestling. When asked to describe himself in high school, he indicated that he was very outspoken and was not afraid to speak his mind, but he also believed he was very kind to others. Daniel indicated that he plans on pursuing a degree in criminology.

**Erica.** Erica is a 22-year-old Caucasian student who just started her fourth year at the University of Northern Iowa. Erica grew up in a rural Iowa community and attended a small, rural high school with fewer than 300 students. Erica explained that she had a strong academic record, graduating toward the top of her graduating class in terms of grade point average. She indicated that she was involved in volleyball and basketball while also participating in a few other student organizations. When asked to describe her personality, Erica said she was sarcastic and free-spirited, and had many friends in a number of different social groups. She is currently pursuing a degree in English education.

**James.** James is a 22-year-old Caucasian student who just started his fourth year at the University of Northern Iowa. James grew up in a rural Iowa community and attended a small,
rural high school with fewer than 250 students. James explained that he graduated toward the top of his graduating class in terms of grade point average. He was involved in band, choir, and a number of other student organizations. When asked to describe himself in high school, James said that he really did not enjoy his time in high school. James said that he did not really like to interact with others and had only one really close friend. He indicated that he was really shy in high school, and usually if he heard from others it was because they were making fun of him. James is currently pursuing a degree in Spanish education.

**Jason.** James is a 19-year-old Caucasian student who just started his second year at the University of Northern Iowa. Jason grew up in a rural Iowa community and attended a small, rural high school with fewer than 250 students. James explained that he graduated toward the middle of his graduating class in terms of grade point average. He was involved in football and track and field and spent much of his time weight lifting. When asked to describe himself in high school, James said that sports consumed all of his time. He said that many of his best friends were other football players. James is currently pursuing a degree in athletic training.

**Katherine.** Katherine is a 22-year-old Caucasian student who just began her fourth year at the University of Northern Iowa. Katherine grew up in an Illinois city and attended an urban high school with over 1,000 students. She indicated that she excelled in high school in terms of academics, earning an “A” grade in almost all of her classes. Katherine was involved in school activities such as student government and National Honor Society. When asked to describe herself in high school, Katherine indicated that she was very introverted in high school, keeping mostly to herself. Katherine is currently pursuing a degree in secondary Spanish education.
Kim. Kim is a 21-year-old African American student who just began her third year at the University of Northern Iowa. Kim grew up in an Illinois city and attended an urban high school with over 2,000 students. Kim indicated that she was an above-average student academically as compared to her peers in terms of her grade point average. Kim was involved in athletics such as basketball and track and field. When asked to describe herself in high school, Kim indicated that she was very outgoing and had many friends. Kim is currently pursuing a degree in middle school education.

Leslie. Leslie is a 22-year-old Caucasian student who just began her fourth year at the University of Northern Iowa. Leslie grew up in a rural Iowa community and attended a small, rural high school with less than 200 students. Leslie recalled that she earned slightly above-average grades as compared to her peers, and graduated in the top half of her graduating class. Leslie indicated that she was involved in a few activities during her early high school years such as band and the dance team. However, later in her high school career she was not involved in any extracurricular activities. When asked to describe herself, Leslie said that she was “friends with everyone” but did not really belong to one specific group of students. Leslie is currently pursuing a degree in business.

Mariah. Mariah is a 19-year-old Latina student who just finished up her second year at the University of Northern Iowa. Mariah grew up in an urban Illinois community and attended a large, urban high school with over 2,500 students. She explained that she graduated at the top of her class in terms of grade point average. Mariah said that she was involved with volleyball, softball, and band. When asked to describe herself in high school, Mariah said that she had a rough freshman year. However, after her freshman year she turned things around and was very
driven to do well in her classes and attend college. Mariah is currently undecided on a major, but plans to pursue a degree in nursing.

**Miguel.** Miguel is an 18-year-old Latino student who just started his first year at the University of Northern Iowa. Miguel grew up in a suburban Iowa community and attended a suburban high school with almost 1,500 students. He explained that he graduated toward the top of his class in terms of his grade point average. Miguel was involved in sports in high school, playing football and soccer. When asked to describe himself in high school, Miguel indicated that he was hard working and enthusiastic. Also, Miguel said he was social and outgoing; however, he felt most comfortable within the confines of a small group of close friends. Miguel plans on pursuing a degree in secondary education.

**Nicole.** Nicole is a 19-year-old Caucasian student who just started her second year at the University of Northern Iowa. Nicole grew up in a rural Iowa community and attended a small rural high school with around 200 students. She indicated that she was an average high school student and admitted that she did not try her hardest to get good grades. Nicole said that she was not involved in any activities in high school. When asked to describe herself in high school, Nicole explained that she was relatively shy and remained quiet until she got to know someone. Nicole is currently undecided on a major.

**Parker.** Parker is a 20-year-old Caucasian student who just began his third year at the University of Northern Iowa. Parker grew up in a suburban Iowa city and attended a residential high school with more than 1,500 students. In terms of academics, Parker explained that he graduated in the top 25 percent of his class. He indicated that he was involved in soccer and student council while in high school. When asked to describe himself in high school, Parker said
that he was fairly shy and had a small group of close friends. Parker is currently pursuing a degree in English education.

**Sophia.** Sophia is a 20-year-old Caucasian student who just started her third year at the University of Northern Iowa. Sophia grew up on the outskirts of a small Iowa suburb and attended a suburban high school with over 700 students. She indicated that she had an outstanding academic record, graduating as the valedictorian of her high school. Sophia was involved in a number of extracurricular activities while in high school, including orchestra, National Honor Society, and the speech and debate club. When asked to describe herself in high school, Sophia indicated that she was a very driven person and took pride in her work, adding that everything she did in high school was purposeful with the intent of improving herself. Sophia is currently pursuing a degree in biology.

**Tamara.** Tamara is a 20-year-old Caucasian student who just began her third year at the University of Northern Iowa. Tamara grew up in a suburban Iowa community and attended a suburban high school with over 1,000 students. Tamara explained that she graduated at the top of her class in terms of her academics. She said that she was involved in a large number of activities in high school that included bowling, soccer, student government, and other volunteer organizations. When asked to describe herself in high school, Tamara said she could be considered “popular,” as she had many friends. Tamara is currently pursuing a degree in business.

**Trish.** Trish is a 22-year-old Caucasian student who just started her fourth year at the University of Northern Iowa. Trish grew up in a suburban Iowa community and attended a suburban high school with more than 1,600 students. She explained that she graduated in the top
half of her high school in terms of her grade point average. Trish indicated that she was involved in mostly fine arts activities that included band and choir. When asked to describe herself in high school, Trish said that she was very outgoing, well rounded, and generally carefree. She suggested that she interacted with a number of different social groups—especially the drama students. Trish is currently pursuing a degree in elementary education.

Table 2 provides a summary of participant demographics. This table gives the reader an opportunity to quickly compare participant similarities and differences. While a high percentage (80 percent) of the participants were Caucasian, all other demographic categories reflect diverse participant backgrounds.

Table 2

Summary of Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Approx. High School Size (Grades 9-12)</th>
<th>High School Setting</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Education (projected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtney</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
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<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Criminology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Field of Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
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<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
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<td>Erica</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>Rural</td>
<td>English Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
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<td>Spanish Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Miguel</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Education (Projected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
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<td>Suburban</td>
<td>English Education</td>
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<td>700</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trish</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All participant information was self-reported. All high schools are located in Iowa unless otherwise noted.
Study Findings

This dissertation explored the phenomenon of teacher care as described by recent high school graduates. The data collected from participant interviews addressed the following research questions:

1. How do recent high school graduates characterize the phenomenon of teacher care (as individuals and in general) as they reflect upon their high school experiences?
2. How do features of Noddings’ ethic of care theory compare to the elements of teacher care as described by recent high school graduates?

A goal of this dissertation was to create tight alignment between the two research questions and the questions asked of participants during interviews. In the following section, the themes that emerged in regard to the first research question are explored. Findings related to the second research question will be discussed later in this chapter.

Research Question 1: The Phenomenon of Teacher Care

Five themes emerged when 20 recent high school graduates were asked to respond to questions aligned to the first research question: How do recent high school graduates characterize the phenomenon of teacher care (as individuals and in general) as they reflect upon their high school experiences? The five emergent themes were as follows:

1. Caring teachers provide descriptive feedback on student work
2. Caring teachers provide assistance when students struggle to understand course content
3. Caring teachers engage students in conversations about post-high school ambitions
4. Caring teachers display a positive and optimistic attitude
5. Caring teachers honor student interests and perspectives
During the data analysis process, patterns of participant comments—or participant references—were grouped together according to topic area for the purpose of identifying themes. For a pattern of participant references to be identified as a theme it was important that the reference occurred frequently in the transcripts and was mentioned by a majority of the participants. This approach was guided by the work of Stake (1995) who suggests, “The search for meaning often is a search for patterns, for consistency … usually the important meanings will come from reappearance over and over” (p. 78). Table 3 identifies each theme that emerged in response to the first research question, along with the total number of times a theme was referenced throughout all interviews, as well as the number of participants who mentioned each theme at least once during their interview. Findings for each theme are provided in the sections below.

Table 3

*Frequency of Participant Comments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total References</th>
<th>Number of Participants Referencing Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring teachers provide descriptive feedback on student work</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring teachers provide assistance when students struggle to understand course content</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring teachers engage students in conversations about post-high school ambitions</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring teachers display a positive and optimistic attitude</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring teachers honor student interests and perspectives</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During interviews participants were asked to characterize the care they felt from high school teachers who participants identified as their “most caring” and “least caring” high school teachers. Throughout the interview process, there were many occurrences when a participant referenced a theme from an appreciative standpoint when describing a most caring teacher, and then later referenced the same theme from a negative standpoint when describing a least caring teacher. When possible, comments from one participant referencing the same emergent theme when discussing a most caring and a least caring high school teacher are presented consecutively, as opposed to being placed in different sections. By placing student perceptions of model examples and non-examples for each theme side by side, this allows for quick and easy comparisons of teacher care themes in different classrooms.

Caring teachers provide descriptive feedback on student work

When asked to characterize the phenomenon of teacher care, 12 of the 20 participants discussed how their former high school teachers approached the idea of providing feedback on student work. Throughout the interviews, participants recalled that their most caring teachers presented students with descriptive feedback on assignments, homework, projects, and assessments. Conversely, participants explained their least caring high school teachers provided minimal feedback on classwork or feedback that lacked description.

One of the participants who spoke extensively about descriptive teacher feedback was Parker. Parker was noticeably complimentary of the feedback he received from the two individuals he identified as his most caring high school teachers. When talking about one of his most caring high school teachers, Parker discussed how the descriptive feedback he received made him work harder in the class. Parker said, “He taught history classes in a different way. He
would give you awesome feedback on your work. I was definitely more inclined to do better work in his class.”

When discussing another of his most caring high school teachers, Parker again discussed a teacher who utilized descriptive feedback on student work. Parker remembered an English teacher who spent a fair amount of time providing students with electronic feedback:

It was a literature class. We did a lot of journaling in there. It was the first time we used Google Docs. It was all on-line … she would leave you comments. She would make references to things in my work—I appreciated her comments. Journals can kind of be thrown away sometimes, but she was legitimately responding to my stuff. I really liked that.

Later in the interview Parker was asked to think about a teacher who he believed was one of his least caring high school teachers. When discussing this teacher, Parker again discussed teacher feedback:

I didn’t feel like there was much of an incentive to do well in the class. There was kind of a point in the year where I just wanted to get through the class. There was never any feedback that made me want to do better.

Courtney was another participant who discussed receiving feedback during her interview. During the conversation, Courtney explained the difference between receiving descriptive and non-descriptive feedback. She emphasized that feedback must be descriptive in order to be helpful. Courtney believed that providing descriptive feedback was an area where one of her most caring high school teachers excelled:

She gave a lot of feedback on all of our papers—it wasn’t just like “good job.” She really gave me good feedback and made me want to do better. Because I knew what kind of
feedback she gave and what she was looking for it made me do that later on in future assignments.

During his interview Bryan explained how much he appreciated receiving descriptive feedback from one of his most caring teachers. According to Bryan, providing descriptive feedback was often the difference between his most caring high school teachers and other teachers:

With a caring teacher, if you ask a question they’re not going to blow you off with the quick answer but they’ll give you the answer that maybe you’re not looking for. But it’s that teacher giving you the feedback that you need. If you ask the teacher a yes or no question there is a why behind it. To me it’s not caring if you ask a question and they say yes or no and move on. That’s just not caring. But to me, someone who actually gives you an explanation and goes more in-depth would be caring.

Similarly, when asked to discuss his least caring high school teachers, Bryan also discussed teacher feedback. Bryan recalled feeling frustrated when he received non-specific feedback from one teacher in particular:

With her I would get my paper handed back with a bunch of red marks “…this is wrong... this is wrong ... this is wrong ... here’s a C.” Ok I know that I got these wrong, but how do I fix it? But nope we were going to move on – [the teacher] was almost robotic. She would do the same thing over and over again and the students would get in that lull. The class wasn’t fun—it wasn’t interesting. If I get a paper handed back to me I want to know what I did wrong but I got no explanation—what the heck!
Katherine explained that one of her most caring high school teachers provided students with the opportunity to receive descriptive feedback on classwork during regularly scheduled one-on-one conversations:

We would do like one-on-one meetings with my writing and I think he saw that I was a good writer so he would praise me for that … so I felt that he really took (the conversations) seriously and so that helped me take it seriously. He would correct more than just the grammar mistakes. One time we had to pick something controversial to write about and so then we would have these meetings with him where we would talk about the topic and what to write about. So, just having a teacher you could talk about something more serious with ... that just helped and I felt his care in these individual interactions.

Trish was another participant who also talked about descriptive feedback. During her interview, Trish was asked what high school teachers could do to improve the amount of care that they demonstrate towards students. After reflecting for a few moments, Trish identified providing students with descriptive feedback:

I will probably start with giving feedback. I would work on giving positive feedback and specific feedback to students. Teachers need to actually care about what feedback they are giving you. Teachers need to take the time to look [over work] and give specific feedback to students. I feel that like once a teacher shows that they care about their work and what they give you, the student is going to give you better work in the future.

Furthermore, Trish recalled how frustrated she became with one of her least caring high school teachers when the teacher did not provide descriptive feedback on a lengthy writing assignment:
I remember our senior year we had to do a research paper and she had nothing to do with that whole process. We would spend three days writing a section and she wouldn’t give any feedback on what we just wrote. I remember we did our support statement and she didn’t help us out at all with that process. I mean like come on—we need this for college! … She gave me some ideas on what we could do [the project on] but she never took the time to help us figure out exactly how to do the process.

Kim also described her frustration when teachers would ignore student requests for feedback. When describing one of her least caring high school teachers, Kim explained the following:

He would walk in and the assignment would be written on the board and we had to copy it down. Instead of letting us know how we were doing, he would just sit there at his desk and expect us to do the work on our own … we were afraid to go up and ask him questions. He wouldn’t even talk to the class until a half an hour in [to the class period]. There was very little interaction and when there was he would be sitting behind his desk with his feet up [on the desk].

When asked what least caring teachers can do to improve the amount of care they demonstrate towards students, Brittany’s thoughts focused on teacher feedback. She explained, “[My teacher] could have used more instruction on the project or assignment instead of just giving us a rough outline. We needed to know exactly what we needed to do to succeed. She didn’t tell us exactly what we needed to do to succeed. [The lack of feedback] was both with the directions or when she was helping us.”

Finally, Leslie also discussed teacher feedback during her interview. She recalled that one of her least caring high school teachers provided feedback that lacked description. In
addition, Leslie indicated the feedback was often negative in nature. While she believed the teacher thought his feedback provided encouragement for students, Leslie believed his words were actually detrimental:

He was poking fun at your flaws and that you didn’t do as well as you should have. He would say like, “Come on!” which for me didn’t work ... I don’t know if that works for other people. I know for me that just seemed discouraging. Kind of like focusing on the fact that you didn’t do so well instead of focusing on asking, “What about this don’t you get and what can I do to help you next time?”

Descriptive feedback was referenced a total of 29 times across all interviews as participants discussed their perceptions of teacher care. Participants indicated that their most caring high school teachers used a variety of methods to provide descriptive feedback on student work. Conversely, participants indicated that their least caring high school teachers provided little or no descriptive feedback on student work. Additionally, participants indicated that some of their least caring teachers provided feedback that was non-specific and therefore did not benefit students.

**Classwork and descriptive feedback are reciprocal.** One pattern that emerged in regard to teacher feedback was that a number of participants explained when they commit time to work on a project or assignment it is reasonable to expect that the teacher will reciprocate by providing descriptive feedback on the work. Furthermore, participants indicated when they complete tasks that are more laborious and time-consuming, it is reasonable to expect that the teacher will reciprocate by providing feedback that is more in-depth and comprehensive.

Several participants indicated that teachers lacked care for students when teachers chose not to reciprocate student work with descriptive feedback. Courtney was one participant who
spoke passionately about her feeling of frustration when she received very little feedback from a teacher on a lengthy writing assignment:

We were working on our research paper—you know like the big thesis project you do during your 10th grade year. I was expecting that if I’m going to write a 40-page paper I need some guidance through this process because I’ve never had to write anything like that. If I’m going to commit that much time, at least the teacher could do it tell us what we were doing wrong! We just never got [feedback] like we needed. She even told us up front that she wasn’t going to have the time to read all of the papers, she said she was going to choose one page and that will be the one page that she grades.

Chloe believed strongly that teachers should reciprocate student work with teacher feedback. She complained that one of her least caring teachers never provided feedback on assignments or tests. As a result, Chloe indicated that students did not know how they were progressing in terms of course standards:

She just didn’t give you much feedback on your work. So if you complete an assignment that you spent all day doing she would just collect your work and you never got it back. You didn’t get back tests either. You never had any idea how you were doing [in the class].

Participants also described reciprocation of student classwork and teacher descriptive feedback when describing their most caring teachers. Participants indicated that they appreciated hearing from teachers when they completed an assignment at a high level. Daniel was one participant who talked extensively about a teacher who reciprocated his hard work on a project with extensive descriptive feedback as well as praise:
So we did a DNA project and we built a DNA model. It wasn’t like a basic DNA model you had to do different types of molecules and DNA—there were lots of different parts. On mine I got 100 percent on it I was like the only person to get 100 percent. I’m like one of only two people that ever got 100 percent. But he had me get up in the front of the room and explain it … and then he got up there and told the class exactly what he liked about it. He put it like the top spot in the room and he like he absolutely loves it and I think—that just made me absolutely happy. I didn’t think that my work was valued that much. I knew I did a good, job but he’d brag about it and say, “I got the best DNA project ever and that was yours!”

The idea of classwork and feedback being reciprocal was an idea that emerged throughout the research. Several participants indicated that their most caring teachers reciprocated student work by providing students with descriptive feedback. Alternately, participants indicated that their least caring teachers did not reciprocate student work with descriptive feedback.

**Connection between school size and teacher feedback.** Another pattern that emerged during the interviews in regard to teacher feedback was that some participants believed that school size affected teacher feedback. Three participants hypothesized that teachers in schools with smaller enrollments have fewer students in their classes and therefore are able to provide more descriptive feedback to their students as compared to teachers in schools with larger enrollments. Alternately, these participants hypothesized that teachers in schools with larger enrollments have more students in their classes and as a result struggle to provide descriptive feedback to their students as compared to teachers in schools with smaller enrollments.
To further explore this theory in context of this research, participant perceptions of teacher feedback were compared according to school enrollment. Six participants who discussed teacher feedback during their interview attended “small” schools with enrollments of less than 600 students. These six participants discussed the teacher feedback of nine different teachers. Of the nine teachers who were discussed, only three teachers provided students with descriptive feedback, while the other six teachers did not provide descriptive feedback. James, who attended a school with around 250 students, indicated that one of his teachers failed to provide students with descriptive feedback:

She didn’t go over [her expectations] and explain how to get better. Instead she would say, “You failed.” And so we were like, “…so that’s it?” It was just a little jarring. I wasn’t normally one of the students who would get less than proficient. There was one time that we had this activity … I worked really hard on it and I got my project back and it was a 50 percent [score]. I asked her why I got 50 percent and she said, “Because it’s not good.” And I was kind of thrown off by that. I put a lot of effort and definitely spent a lot of time and she never gave us a rationale or a rubric for it.

Six participants who discussed teacher feedback during their interview attended “large” schools with enrollments of greater than 700 students. These six participants discussed the teacher feedback of nine teachers. Of the nine teachers who were discussed, six teachers provided students with descriptive feedback, while only three teachers did not provide students with descriptive feedback. Miguel, who attended a school with over 1,500 students, explained his amazement with a teacher who managed to provide descriptive feedback to all students in the class:
It was like she was everywhere! She was great about moving around and checking on students and giving them feedback. I don’t know how she did it … but she was able to pull it off. You always felt like you could count on her to tell you what you needed to do next.

Table 4 provides a comparison of participant perceptions of teacher feedback according to school enrollment. When comparing perceptions of teacher feedback, participants in this study indicated that school size does not affect a teacher’s ability to provide students with descriptive feedback. While further research may be needed to explore the connection between school enrollment and class size, this comparison suggests that teachers are capable of providing quality, descriptive feedback to students regardless of school size.

Table 4

*Participant Perceptions of Teacher Feedback According to School Enrollment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School Enrollment</th>
<th>Total Number of Teachers Referenced</th>
<th>Number of Teachers Who Provided Descriptive Feedback</th>
<th>Number of Teachers Who did not Provide Descriptive Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>600 or fewer Students</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700 or greater Students</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More broadly, participants indicated that their most caring teachers provided students with descriptive feedback on their work. Participants suggested feedback that identified strong aspects of the work as well as feedback that provided constructive criticism helped to deepen students’ understanding of a topic. Furthermore, participants believed that feedback was
reciprocal, meaning that teachers who operate through an ethic of care reciprocate student work by providing descriptive feedback.

**Caring teachers provide assistance when students struggle to understand course content**

When asked to characterize teacher care, 19 of the 20 participants discussed the various ways teachers responded when it was determined that students did not understand course content. Throughout the interviews, participants recalled that their most caring teachers provided students with assistance when students were struggling. Conversely, participants explained that their least caring teachers did not provide assistance when it was determined that students were struggling to understand course content.

Initially, this theme may appear similar to the theme of teachers providing feedback on student work. However, there are two key differences between the themes. The first difference is when students received teacher feedback the students may or may not have realized they were struggling to understand a concept. Therefore, in many cases descriptive teacher feedback (theme one) occurred before the teacher decided how to provide assistance when students struggled to understand course content (theme two). The second difference between the themes is that participants indicated that feedback was as much helpful to receive when students understood a concept, as it was when students were struggling with a concept. The notion of teachers using descriptive feedback as reinforcement for outstanding work (theme one) was a much different concept than the notion of teachers providing assistance when students were struggling (theme two).

Kim was one of the participants who spoke extensively about how teachers responded to students when students did not understand the content that had been taught. Kim characterized the differences between how her most caring and least caring teachers responded when students
struggled to understand course content. When discussing one of her most caring teachers, Kim explained the following:

My math teacher always made sure that her students understood the material she was teaching. She consistently came in before school and stayed after school to help me until I understood what she was teaching. When it came to math, it took some redirecting for me to connect all of the dots to fully comprehend the material … my teacher was very good at finding ways to adapt her thinking and explanations. If one student did not understand it one way, she would do research and explain it a different way.

When Kim was asked to describe one of her least caring teacher high school teachers, her attention again focused on how the teacher responded to students when they struggled to understand course content. Instead of discussing a teacher who provided assistance, Kim explained that one of her least caring teachers displayed no effort to provide assistance to struggling students:

This [least caring] teacher would just sit at the front of the room and lecture from the PowerPoint. The teacher did not care for the students and made no effort to talk to the students. He made no effort to help students when they were struggling. He made no effort to talk to the students about what is happening in their life. The students were just numbers to her … she just didn’t care if they succeeded or not.

Whereas other teachers provided assistance when students struggled to understand course content, Kim explained that this least caring teacher provided no assistance when students attempted to ask questions about material that they did not understand. She said, “He sat in his chair at his desk the entire duration of the school day. He never walked around the room, and never answered any questions.”
Chloe was another participant who discussed the varied responses she received from teachers when it came to asking them for assistance on understanding course content. She provided the following dialogue when describing the difference between her most caring and her least caring teachers:

If you don’t understand, then [the most caring teachers] take the time. They seem like they want to work with you. They are doing whatever they can to help you understand. But the [least caring teachers] don’t care about helping. They don’t go the extra mile to help students out.

The noticeable contrast that Chloe explained between her most caring and least caring teachers in terms of the assistance they provided struggling students was a common thread that emerged across many participant interviews. In total, nine participants described completely opposite approaches between their most caring and their least caring teachers in terms of their response to students who were struggling to understand course content. Whereas the most caring teachers did what they could to help students, the least caring teachers did not appear to have interest in helping students.

James was another participant who characterized a sharp contrast between his most caring and his least caring teachers in terms of the different responses those teachers utilized when students did not grasp a concept after it had been taught. When talking about one of his most caring high school teachers, James said the following:

She helped other students—no matter if it was outside of class she was always willing to help out students. She would say, “Ok, we’re going to work on this worksheet if you have any questions just raise your hand.” She would even spend time talking to a student who came to her classroom during that class whenever she would have time and when it
was appropriate. Just seeing that during class and seeing that she made time for other students even when it wasn’t their class was pretty good for showing that she cared about every student’s achievement.

When James shifted gears and started talking about his least caring high school teachers, he recalled how one particular teacher would refer students to the textbook when students had questions about what had been taught:

I don’t think we learned from her. When we went in for extra help after class was over she didn’t explain it. She would just sit there and say, “…read the book—you’re not reading the book.” She made us feel bad for even asking questions.

Erica explained that one of her most caring high school teachers would provide assistance by working extra hours to make sure students understood the material. She recalled that one teacher in particular made home visits to help students that were not able to come in after school:

She would go way out of the way to help students. She would stay after school or come early to help you out. She even made a couple home visits to some kids that weren’t able to come in before school or after school … she would go above and beyond to help you.

Courtney remembered a caring teacher who took time to assist students who were struggling understanding course content. She recalled, “I thought she was really helpful because I would mess up a lot and I would go to her and tell her I didn’t understand it. She would take the time to walk through [the problems] and answer my questions.”

Later in the interview, Courtney discussed one of her least caring teachers in terms of the teacher’s response when students struggled to understand what had been taught. Similar to other participants when they characterized their least caring teachers, Courtney indicated that the teacher’s response was to refer students back to the textbook. Courtney explained the following:
I just never felt like he really cared enough to help me because I remember asking my mom if she could find me a tutor or something because I just didn’t get it. And he never took the time to ask if everybody understood the material—it was confusing. He would just say, “Here is what it is, take a look at the book, and turn in your paper” and that was it. There was nothing outside of that.

Courtney continued to speak about the same least caring high school teacher, commenting on the lack of assistance the teacher provided when students indicated that they did not understand what had been taught:

I just remember walking up to his desk and handing him a paper. And he wouldn’t even acknowledge you when you came up to him. He would just be at his computer and you’ll be standing there looking at him and even if you wanted help he wouldn’t give it to you because it was a disturbance to him to ask for help. I just remember walking up to his desk multiple times and there was no expression from him at all.

When asked to characterize one of his most caring teachers, Bryan recalled that one teacher in particular spent plenty of class time making sure that her students understood the material that had been taught:

When you asked a question she was going to give you an answer that was honest and that was going to be in-depth and that was going to be helpful for the students. She would make things clear. If a student had a question about directions I can remember that she would stop class and explain—there was no point in doing something wrong the first time.
When Bryan was asked to describe another of his most caring high school teachers, Bryan again recalled an individual who provided assistance to students who needed additional help when they were stuck on a concept:

I remember having conversations with him whether it was during class or after class—I told him, “I don’t get this.” There was confusion. But he didn’t just giving me a quick answer and move on. We would have conversations—he would help me out through conversation. He would get me through stuck points and parts I didn’t understand.

Later in the interview, Bryan described an incident he recalled in regard to one of his least caring high school teachers. Bryan indicated that he could not believe how little care this particular teacher demonstrated when students indicated they were struggling to understand coursework:

This was a language arts class. I think we were editing others’ papers. One student was like, “I am so lost right now!” and took that leap in front of the class. I don’t know what [the teacher] said … but she said something along the lines of, “Well, you should have been paying attention.” It’s one of those things where you look back and - man! [The teacher] just does not care … and when you ask her a question she would say, “you’ve got to figure that out.” For someone like me who set the bar for myself—I had pride in most of the work I did—that was a tough pill to swallow.

Nicole was another participant who discussed the various ways teachers responded when it was determined that students were struggling to grasp a concept. Nicole acknowledged being an “average” student compared to her peers, and admitted that she did not always try her hardest to earn good grades. Given her up and down high school academic career, Nicole brought a unique insight to the interview in terms of how different teachers responded when Nicole did not
understand class content. The following were Nicole’s initial comments when describing one of her most caring high school teachers:

She knew what she was teaching was a hard concept to understand and so she would let us make mistakes. She would let us mess up but we could come to her with questions. I thought that was really helpful because I would mess up a lot and I would go to her and tell her I didn’t understand it.

Later in the interview Nicole was asked to explain how this particular teacher modeled care to students. Again, she quickly referred to the teacher’s willingness to assist students who did not understand the material:

She definitely spent a lot of time with each of the students. There are some of the students that you know … we slacked on our homework but she would be like, “Hey, if you want to come in during study hall I can help you with this.” So in that way she showed more care than other teachers. There would be other teachers that the other students felt like they didn’t really care if you did poorly. But she actually made sure that they didn’t fail his class and they were actually going to graduate too.

Alternately, when asked to describe one of her least caring teachers, Nicole portrayed a completely different approach when it was determined that students were not understanding course content:

It was my math teacher, and she taught algebra and geometry, and I love math, but sometimes I would get so lost because she would move at a fast pace. And even when kids weren’t picking up on it she didn’t spend the time working with them. Instead, she was like, “Okay you know you can figure it out yourself just read the material,” like that type of stuff. She didn’t really show that she genuinely cared.
The various approaches teachers used when responding to students who did not understand course content were referenced 72 times across the 20 participant interviews as participants discussed their perceptions of teacher care. Thirteen participants indicated that their most caring high school teachers provided assistance when students did not understand the lesson, while 19 participants indicated that their least caring high school teachers did not attempt to help struggling students. With all but one participant mentioning that their least caring teachers did not provide help when students did not understand course content, this theme was mentioned more than any other theme in terms of participants criticizing the care they received from a teacher.

Teacher assistance when high-performing students struggle. One question that emerges when discussing teacher assistance is how teachers should respond when academically high-performing students struggle. Some have suggested that when teachers provide too much help, high performing students may become dependent on teacher help and as a result struggle when they do not receive similar help at the college level (Wubbels et al., 1999).

Given this viewpoint, it was advantageous to explore the perceptions of the academically high-performing participants and their perceptions of teacher assistance. Nineteen of 20 participants indicated that providing assistance to struggling students was a characteristic of teacher care. Of the 19 participants who discussed this theme, 15 participants indicated that they performed at high levels academically as compared to the rest of their high school peers. High-performing students indicated that their most caring teachers provided assistance while their least caring teachers did not.

Sophia was one of the participants who indicated she excelled academically in high school. Despite graduating at the top of her class, Sophia explained how she appreciated the help
she received from her teachers. Sophia said that one teacher in particular was always willing to listen and provide assistance when she had questions:

He was always willing to listen if I said I was confused. He would listen more than talk. But then because of the kind of help I needed he would just more kind of point me in the right direction. It wasn’t like this long, drawn out explanation. It was always just kind of a shorter reply. There was always more listening than talking. But he always was willing to help.

Miguel was another student who indicated he had graduated at the top of his class. When asked to discuss one of his most caring teachers, Miguel recalled one teacher in particular who was willing to provide assistance when students needed help. Miguel explained that this teacher always made time to help students when they were struggling to understand content:

She was my homeroom teacher my senior year. She was very caring … she would take the time out of her busy schedule to help me or other students that maybe didn’t understand the content right away. She is a mother, so she had those motherly instincts. She practiced as if we were her own children. … Also, she didn’t want [class] to be focused on lecture all the time. There were times where we had to work in groups. She was always trying to teach in ways that made sense to everyone. She was always asking if the lesson made sense.

Given the high percentage of top academic students who indicated that providing assistance was a characteristic of teacher care, it appears that high-performing students appreciate and welcome teacher assistance as much as any other student. While further research addressing the type of assistance that is most effective for students at different achievement levels may need to be explored, this research suggests that students believe teachers providing
help when students are struggling is a characteristic of teacher care. Furthermore, this study also suggests that all students—regardless of achievement level—should receive some form of assistance from the teacher when they are struggling to understand course content.

Caring teachers engage students in conversations about post-high school ambitions

When asked to describe teacher care, 12 of the 20 participants discussed how their most caring high school teachers engaged students in conversations about post-high school plans and ambitions. Participants reported that these interactions covered a variety of similar topics, including discussions on possible career path options, exchanging ideas on which colleges to attend, and advice on how to fill out college paperwork.

Anthony was one of the participants who spoke about his appreciation for teachers who would take time to talk about post-high school plans. When asked to describe one of his most caring high school teachers, Anthony recalled a number of conversations he had with one teacher in particular where college preparation was the topic of discussion:

So, he was doing his best to get me into the class, get me involved, and get me on a successful path toward college during my senior year. And also getting me a job too while I’m in high school that would help me be ready for college.

Anthony continued to characterize the care he received from the same teacher by referencing another conversation he and the teacher had regarding the career path Anthony was contemplating pursuing:

I was trying to find out what type of business field I wanted to go into. And he clarified that up for me. He had some friends that had done similar things that I wanted to do with a business. So he was just showing his advice, showing how successful this person was [as a result of going into this area of business].
Katherine was another participant who discussed the conversations she had with one of her most caring high school teachers. Katherine was very complimentary about this teacher’s willingness to listen, and explained that her conversations with this teacher often would focus on college and career plans:

I had a long conversation during my senior year because I knew I wanted to do something in Spanish but I didn’t know what school I wanted to go to or what I wanted to do with it. And so after class one day my Spanish teacher … I was supposed to go to lunch after class but I just stayed there and just talked to her probably like a good half hour—just us two—about the school she went to and why she went into teaching Spanish and if that’s something I would be good at.

Later in the interview Katherine again referred to conversations she had with the same Spanish teacher. Katherine, who is currently pursuing a degree in secondary Spanish education, recalled that the teacher helped her decide on an academic major:

I go back to one of my Spanish teachers during my senior high school where, everyone is deciding what college to go to and what to major in. And so just her being willing to kind of let me talk through my thinking and if I should continue Spanish and whether I should go to the school that she went to or a different one. That was just really great of her.

When Jason was asked to talk about one of his most caring high school teachers, he recalled one moment in particular when the teacher started a conversation with him about possible career paths. Up until that point, Jason admitted he had not given much thought about careers. However, the teacher explained that he believed that Jason had a bright future in the
area of exercise science. Jason, who is currently pursuing a degree in athletic training, discussed the following:

I wasn’t really into personal training at the time and I didn’t know it was a thing. But then he would start looking at colleges for me and tell me which schools have exercise science and which schools had strength and conditioning and told me where I could go and what I needed in terms of GPA and ACT scores. He helped me get into a field that I was interested in.

During her interview Nicole discussed a science teacher she had in high school who would talk about college and career paths with students. According to Nicole, these talks about the future were the types of conversations this teacher held with many students:

Especially during my senior year he worked with us on our career paths and it was always his point to be like, “Oh you’re really good at this,” and, “Have you ever thought about that?” He definitely supported us and tried to push us as far as we could like going to college and all that stuff.

Nicole recalled a project that the same science teacher had students complete. Nicole explained that students had to present information on three career paths related to the science field to the rest of the class. After Nicole was done giving the presentation, she vividly remembered a follow-up conversation between herself and the teacher:

At this time I was thinking about being a mortician and he liked the idea and was like, “Hey, I think if you’re up for it you should definitely go for it.” And like during study halls if we spent time doing projects in his class he would talk to us about certain colleges and ask us, “Have you thought about taking these classes in college?” He also told us, “If
you ever need references just let me know.” So that way he showed that he genuinely
cared about our future. He would do the little things like that.

Chloe was another participant who expressed her appreciation for a teacher who would
engage students in conversations about college plans. Chloe explained that one of her most
caring teachers spent time helping her develop goals for the future:

She would ask me if I had a [one] year goal, a two-year goal, and a five-year goal. She
seemed interested in what I was doing. She seemed interested and she tried to help me
figure out what path I wanted to take as well—what career path.

In addition to discussions that teachers had with participants about selecting an academic
major, choosing a college, or exploring a career path, a number of participants indicated that they
appreciated less-formal conversations that were tied to participants’ post-high school ambitions.
Several participants discussed how their most caring teachers would do small things in class to
help students prepare for college. Participants indicated these little steps teachers took ended up
making a big difference in the participant’s lives. Bryan was one participant who discussed the
“warnings” he received from one of his most caring teachers:

One thing with him that he talked about a lot—it was about moving on. If you’re going
to college like some different things to expect—things that were going to be a lot
different than they are now. I think that is helping me in college when I think about what
he said when I was a senior in high school and I think, “Ok, he warned me about this.” I
wouldn’t have thought about it if he hadn’t warned me—but he was right. I would thank
him for that now if I ever saw him.

Tamara shared a similar perspective as she discussed her appreciation for one of her most
caring teachers who taught students skills they would need for college: “He would write random
vocabulary words and notes on the board and my brain would struggle. But eventually you would figure it out … and honestly him doing that helped me with some of my college skills.”

Katherine described a teacher who helped address the question of “when are we going to use this” when covering class content. Katherine indicated that one teacher in particular always looked for ways to connect classroom content to possible career paths for students:

We used to think, “I'm never going to use this.” But then she would show her students reasons why they are going to need this or how they could use it or open up their minds to the other experiences where it would be useful. And also she just showed them like the connections in the world and to what jobs [the skills] would help be helpful.

Conversations between teacher and students about students’ post-high school ambitions were referenced 21 times across all interviews as participants discussed perceptions of teacher care. Participants described how their most caring teachers used a variety of approaches to engage students in conversations about college and career plans. Some students noticed that these conversations occurred as a result of classroom assignments, while other students suggested that the conversations happened without any connection to classroom curriculum. Regardless of approach, participants indicated their appreciation for teachers who had these discussions about future plans with students.

**Post-high school discussions have long-lasting effects on students.** In addition to participants indicating that conversations about post-high school ambitions were a characteristic of teacher care, several participants reported those conversations impacted student college and career decisions. Brittany was one of the participants who discussed how she appreciated the conversations she and one of her most caring high school teachers had in regard to her post-high school ambitions. Not only did this teacher provide Brittany with the confidence that she could
be successful after high school, this teacher also influenced Brittany’s decision to choose a major in the field of education:

(My teacher) always told me I could do something … and she really inspired me to choose my major and to choose what I wanted to do. She was the one who really helped me to decide what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to be like her.

Anthony (business major) and Jason (athletic training major) both spoke extensively about how conversations with a high school teacher about post-high school ambitions directly influenced their decisions to select the major they are each currently pursuing in college. Anthony explained that at one point he had expressed his interest in pursuing a business major to one of his most caring high school teachers. Anthony mentioned, “Once he found out that I was interested in business, he found some former students to meet with me and answer all of my questions.”

Jason explained that at one point in high school he was not quite sure what career he wanted to pursue. However, one teacher noticed that Jason had an interest in athletic training and suggested that he look into that career path. Jason recalled, “He would sit down by my side and we would look up colleges that had the athletic training major.”

Eleven participants explained that conversations with a high school teacher about post-high school ambitions played a significant role in the college-related decisions of those participants. The 11 participants indicated that decisions such as the student’s selection of which college to attend or the student’s selection of an academic major were influenced by the conversations they had with one of their most caring high school teachers.
**Post-high school discussions depend on strong teacher-student relationships.** The theme of teachers engaging students in conversations about post-high school ambitions was unique compared to the other four themes in that participants only referenced their most caring teachers when talking about this characteristic of care. Twelve participants recalled having a conversation about post-high school ambitions with their most caring teachers, while none of the participants recalled having a conversation about post-high school ambitions with their least caring teachers. Furthermore, participants identified a total of 38 teachers who were referred to as a least caring teacher. When participants characterized and shared experiences with those 38 least caring teachers, there was not a single reference to discussions about college plans, career aspirations, or general plans after high school.

The data suggests that conversations about post-high school ambitions depend on strong teacher-student relationships. If students do not feel care from teachers, students are unwilling or do not feel comfortable having conversations with those teachers about post-high school ambitions. Furthermore, when teachers have not built a relationship with a student, teachers are unwilling to engage students in a conversation about post-high school ambitions or do not feel comfortable having those conversations.

Five participants discussed how they believed conversations about plans after high school occurred after there was a strong bond between teacher and student. Erica was one of the participants who indicated that it took time for her to warm up to the idea about talking to her teacher about post-high school ambitions. Erica explained that she had a teacher for three of her four years in high school. Erica said that it took until her second year with the teacher to feel comfortable approaching the teacher to discuss college plans:
The first year I had her as a freshman and I thought, “Wow, she is mean!” During my freshman year she was scary, especially coming in as a freshman … but then I realized my sophomore year that I really missed her and I liked that she had really high expectations. She was a tough teacher but she would walk you through it and make sure you got there … by the time I was a junior I felt totally comfortable going to her. I remember I would stay after class and we talked about colleges and what I wanted to do [for a career].

When asked to describe her most caring teachers, Trish recalled a music teacher who was known for building strong relationships with students. Trish explained that once a strong relationship had been formed between herself and the teacher, the teacher looked for an opportunity to talk to Trish about her college plans:

This particular teacher, she got to know me quite well from class and also the [music] extracurriculars. One day after a rehearsal we were just walking and putting away materials … it was near the end of high school and she started asking me about college plans. She really challenged me and asked me what I was choosing my [college] based upon. She asked me if I was picking my school because of academics or because of the social opportunities. I really picked my school based upon how I felt when I was there and the community that I felt I would receive. It was really good a process that information with her … I knew if I had any college questions that I could go to her because of that conversation.

An analysis of the participant dialogue in regards to conversations about post-high school plans suggests that conversations about post-high school ambitions can have long-lasting effects on students. Over half of the participants in this study indicated that a conversation they had
with a teacher in high school helped the participant to select a college or choose which academic major to pursue. However, students were selective with which teachers they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings about post-high school plans. This study suggests that students and teachers will engage in conversations about students’ post-high school ambitions only when a strong relationship has been formed between student and teacher. If a caring relationship has not been formed it is unlikely that a conversation about post-high school ambitions will occur.

**Caring teachers display a positive and optimistic attitude**

When asked to characterize the phenomenon of teacher care, 17 of the 20 participants discussed the attitudes and demeanors of their most caring and least caring high school teachers. Participants indicated that their most caring high school teachers regularly displayed a positive and optimistic attitude. Alternately, participants indicated that their least caring high school teachers regularly displayed a negative and pessimistic attitude.

At first glance, the theme of caring teachers displaying a positive and optimistic attitude appears to be unique as compared to the other four themes. Whereas the other four themes revolve around specific actions of a teacher, this theme revolves around the demeanor and attitude of a teacher. However, interview dialogue indicates that participants perceived teacher attitude as a choice. Similar to the other four themes, participants insist that teacher attitude is a conscious decision that a teacher makes each day when he or she comes to school.

Several participants started off their interviews identifying their most caring teachers as having a positive and optimistic attitude, and then later in the interview identified their least caring teachers as having a negative and pessimistic attitude. Jason was one of the participants who recalled the distinct differences in the demeanors of his most caring high school teachers
and his least caring high school teachers. Jason recalled that one of his most caring high school teachers was “never in a bad mood.” When asked to discuss another of his most caring teachers, Jason identified a teacher that was always positive and optimistic in her interactions with students, saying, “She always seemed happy and she was always smiling. She was always positive and she never seemed like she was in a bad mood. It was impossible not to like her.”

Alternately, when asked to describe a least caring high school teacher, Jason recalled a teacher whose attitude always appeared to be “cold” and negative when interacting with Jason and other students:

It was an algebra class and this guy he just taught math and he just didn’t seem like he cared about anybody. He was super strict and didn’t put up with anything. That was a class that you just didn’t talk. He put up with absolutely nothing. I would have him for study hall and I’d be working on something and then he would just put his finger on my back—and he’d push on my back—hard with his finger. It made you uncomfortable and then he would ask me what I was working on. I don’t know he was just a cold and creepy guy … no one liked him. I think he recently retired but it was the same thing no matter who you asked … I don’t even think the other teachers cared for him either. He just had a scowl [for a] look on his face at all times and nobody liked him … he was just cold and dry.

Later on in the interview, Jason recalled a negative interaction with the same least caring teacher. Jason recalled a brief conversation he had with the teacher when he went back to visit his former high school during winter break:

I went back during my first semester of college to work out and he was passing through the weight room … it was me and my best friend and the teacher said, “How’s it going,
has-been’s?” Yeah, that was his way of greeting me. Whether or not that was his way of joking around, it made me mad. He was just like the Grinch.

Mariah was another student who described a sharp contrast between one of her most caring teachers and one of her least caring teachers in terms of the attitude both teachers displayed toward others. In regard to one of her most caring teachers, Mariah described the following:

In her class … you almost felt like there should be cookies present because there was such a warm and comforting sense in the class. You know you were loved even though she never had to say it. Every single person was loved and they were valued. Even if they were the biggest turd in the class and they couldn’t keep it together. She was like a grandmother—a mom type figure. It was all love, that’s all it was. Love, caring, and devotion. No matter what, she was always in a good mood. When I would see her talking to other teachers, the other teachers were always smiling.

Later in the interview Mariah was asked to characterize the care she felt from one of her least caring high school teachers. When Mariah discussed one teacher in particular, she focused much of her attention on the negative attitude the teacher displayed when working with students:

The least caring teacher that I ever had was awful. I felt picked on, I felt singled out, I felt belittled, I felt dumb, and I felt incapable of anything. It was really painful. I don’t know of another human who has ever made me feel so small as that teacher did.

Trish recalled her most caring teacher from high school was always pleasant with all of the students: “I would say [she was] really welcoming and approachable. You could go and talk to her about anything and they would also care for anyone—not just you but anyone.”
When asked to describe a least caring teacher, Trish described someone who displayed an attitude that differed greatly from her most caring teacher. Whereas her most caring teacher approached each day with an optimistic outlook, Trish explained that her least caring teacher carried himself with a noticeably pessimistic attitude:

Unfortunately this teacher would address us as a whole group and would address us in a way that never made us feel confident about ourselves. I would say more focused on the negatives rather than the positives. It had to do a lot with language and the words that he would use, whether it was a whole group setting or a more one-on-one conversation. He just always seemed upset or dissatisfied with us.

Trish continued to discuss the attitude of this least caring high school teacher. When she was asked to describe one story in particular about this teacher, Trish shared a memory where the teacher’s negativity and pessimism were highlighted:

This was a teacher from a music class and we had competed in a competition and our energy was just awesome. We were getting back on the bus and as a group you could just tell we’ve done the best we had ever done as a whole group together. We walked away with an award we hadn’t received before … it wasn’t first place and it wasn’t best overall but we really thought we had done our best that day. I’ll never forget he got on the bus and yelled, “We’re going home!” and that was it. There was no “congratulations” … there was no “I’m proud of you” … it was just “see you back at home.” Maybe we could have gotten that first place, but it just really shifted our mood as a group of students. We were so proud and we had reached a threshold we had never reached before and then to not really hear any words of affirmation … he just never really responded in the way we had hoped.
Bryan spoke very highly about one of his most caring teachers in regard to the positive attitude she constantly modeled to the students. He recalled, “…in the lunchroom, for instance, she always seemed to have a smile on her face. As a student you kind of pick up on that.” He went on to further describe the optimistic approach this teacher brought to her job:

She would stand in the lunchroom and ask, “How’s it going?” She would walk around to tables if she had supervision and lunch duty—she would come around and see how it was going. It was those types of things where she was smiling and bringing lots of energy and the other teachers were feeding off of her as well. That was contagious for students as well. She helped other teachers to put a smile on their face to get the kids excited.

When asked to describe one of her most caring high school teachers, Courtney was quick to describe the classroom environment of one high school teacher. Courtney recalled that this teacher created a positive and welcoming classroom atmosphere that was noticeable to students the moment they walked through the door:

Her classroom was just so fun and you would feel so welcomed to class because of the way she would arrange the classroom. She started off every class where … on the back wall she would have on the whiteboard all kinds of information for us … with like the date, different facts about the date, and she would make note if it was somebody’s birthday. She would do just really cool things you wouldn’t think about. And we would start every day like that.

Courtney continued to describe this teacher, describing the way that this teacher used positive interactions with all students saying, “She welcomes everyone that came in through the door. Whether you were a good student or maybe not the best student she treated everyone equal that came into our classroom.”
James recalled that one of his least caring teachers was a teacher who was very pessimistic in the classroom. James explained that this particular teacher did not like students talking in her class, and would often display frustration when students were not meeting her expectations:

If we were talking in class—it was always, “stop talking!” Sometimes it was pretty aggressive. Sometimes this teacher would be like, “You guys are really annoying right now! I don’t want to hear you talking.” Or if we were talking about prom—she would completely cut us down and said, “Prom is not going to matter in five years!”

Sophia also discussed teacher attitude during her interview. Sophia indicated that one of her least caring teachers made a decision to isolate himself from students and chose not to interact with the class. Sophia explained that by not interacting with students, others in the class thought of the teacher as a “grumpy old man.” When Sophia was asked to explain what the teacher could have done differently to show care toward students, Sophia immediately referred to teacher attitude:

[He] needed to make the choice to get to know each student. And maybe even with some like kind of icebreakers things … He didn’t really do much as a teacher. Something that showed that he was a human being—not just a grumpy old man. He would just sit at his desk and not interact with anyone! Actually when I had him it was right before he stopped teaching altogether. And so he had already checked out.

When asked to discuss their perceptions of teacher care, participants focused on the attitude of their teachers. The demeanor with which teachers approach the job—whether it was positive and optimistic or negative and pessimistic—was referenced 42 times across all interviews. Participants recalled that their most caring teachers always seemed to have positive
and optimistic attitudes, while participants indicated that their least caring high school teachers regularly demonstrated negative and pessimistic attitudes.

**Caring teachers remain positive when students are not meeting classroom expectations.** This study found that participants’ most caring teachers were able to navigate incidents when students were not meeting teacher behavioral expectations (e.g., breaking classroom rules) or teacher academic expectations (e.g., scoring poorly on assessments) with a positive and optimistic attitude. Participants indicated their most caring teachers remained calm and demonstrated patience when students were not meeting teacher expectations. Nicole described how one of her most caring teachers responded when students were not meeting the teacher’s behavioral expectations. Nicole explained how her teacher demonstrated patience when students used inappropriate behaviors in the classroom:

> She never yelled at us over the little things. If there are some kids being terrible to other kids or being bullies or just not listening she would raise her voice, but she was a younger teacher so she knew how to work with those kids a lot more easily. She wouldn’t scold us she would talk to us in a reasonable voice and if you were doing a bad job you had to stay after class.

Alternately, this study found that participants’ least caring teachers responded to incidents when students were not meeting teacher expectations with a negative and pessimistic attitude. Chloe discussed how one of her least caring teachers responded when students were not meeting the teacher’s expectations. Chloe recalled that her least caring teacher demonstrated significant frustration toward students when he felt they were behaving poorly:

> I’ll always remember she had like this hallway next to her room and any time you were in trouble she put you in the hallway. One time she put a girl in the hallway and forgot
about her. She would get mad easily and her voice was very stern. Oh yeah—she would also slap her hand on the desk if she got mad about something. She would slap really hard.

Seventeen participants discussed teacher attitude when characterizing teacher care during their interview. Fourteen participants indicated that their most caring teachers usually appeared positive and optimistic, while 10 participants suggested that their least caring teachers usually appeared negative and pessimistic. Given the large number of participants who referred to teacher attitude, this study indicates that displaying a positive and optimistic attitude is an approach that teachers utilize to demonstrate care to students.

**Caring teachers honor student interests and perspectives**

The theme of high school teachers honoring student interests and perspectives emerged from 19 of the 20 participants when they were asked to characterize teacher care. Throughout the interviews, participants recalled that their most caring teachers honored the different interests and perspectives that students brought to the classroom. Alternately, participants indicated that their least caring high school teachers would often disregard or ignore differences in student interests and preferences.

Although student interests and student perspectives are similar ideas, it is important to understand the difference between the two. Student interests in this study refer to the hobbies, activities, passions and matters that were important to the participants. Student interests also refer to events and happenings that were relevant to participants. Participants indicated that their most caring teachers would ask students about interests and would engage students in conversations about those interests. Students indicated that their most caring teachers attempted to weave student interests into course curriculum and assignments whenever possible.
Participants also suggested that their most caring teachers would allow for student choice on assignments, meaning that students were able to complete assignments in a way that matched their interests and preferences.

Student perspectives in this study refer to the collection of unique experiences that each individual student brought into the classroom. Participants indicated that their perspectives helped shape their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Participants explained that their most caring teachers were able to understand feelings and empathize with students. Similarly, some participants explained that their most caring teachers would listen to stories about participants’ experiences and make teaching decisions based on those experiences.

During his interview, James reminisced about two of his most caring teachers and the interest that those teachers took in the lives of their students. James recalled that one of his teachers worked hard to learn about student interests by talking to students about their involvement in activities:

We would be doing an activity and she would walk around the room and make sure that we were participating in whatever we needed to. And she would also ask us personal things. Sometimes if we shared something in class she would always kind of build on that and kind of try and build a relationship with the student and not just brush past things. She definitely talked to me a lot about just being in choir and the things that I was involved with and my experiences in choir. Just kind of made a connection that we would talk about the different songs we learned in choir and she would talk to me about the songs they sang in community choir. Just having those conversations on anything we could connect on.
When asked to describe another of his most caring high school teachers, James discussed someone who worked hard to understand student perspectives. James indicated that this particular teacher was willing to listen to students and their concerns about how to go about managing their busy schedules:

[The teacher] was also in charge of plays and musicals and all of that. So he took a lot of time out of his schedule to do those things. He was always considerate of students that had sports going on or other things that were going on with their family. He was considerate whenever he would do things for the plays and musicals.

Bryan recalled a story about one of his most caring teachers where the teacher showed great interest in understanding Bryan’s perspective after the teacher noticed that he appeared to be in a bad mood during class:

It was a [pre-calculus] class. I think it was—it was after a football game. We lost. The last thing I wanted to do was sit in class. I believe I had the class 2nd period. Tired, didn’t want to be there, beat up from the night before. He’s trying to get me to do work. I can remember he came over and talked to me privately and he was just kind of like a person. He said, “Tough game last night, huh?” We had a conversation and he was like, “…alright you’ve let that out. Now let’s try and get some work done.” No matter what went on the night before, he helped to understand that I could still get stuff done.

Later on in the interview Bryan was asked to describe one of his least caring teachers. During this conversation, Bryan revealed that one particular teacher appeared to only care about his own interests as opposed to Bryan or the other students’ interests:

We are left with our heads in the clouds. We didn’t know what was going on and it was all because he had to tie it into something that only he cares about. It was all about
something football or something softball. But you need to tap into something that we all care about. I like football, but it seemed like we were doing it all day long. Maybe it’s a little confusing … but the way he was doing it was about his interests not ours.

Chloe recalled that one of her most caring teachers worked hard to get to know the students and their interests. In regard to this one particular teacher, Chloe indicated the teacher communicated with Chloe outside of the normal class time:

I felt like she cared about me quite a bit because she gave me her cell phone number and if anything came up I could call or text her. She was very heartwarming and I could go to her about any schoolwork, outside of schoolwork, anything. She was there for me to talk to. She really got to know me and the things I enjoyed.

When asked to discuss one of her least caring high school teachers, Chloe recalled a teacher who appeared more concerned with her own interests as opposed to the students’ interests. Chloe said, “Everything had to be her way—she never listened to the kids. She never once asked questions about us, it was all about her.”

Katherine was one of the participants who spoke specifically about a teacher who wanted to honor the student interests in the classroom. She described a social studies teacher who she had for a couple different classes in high school:

He just had a really great way of connecting with us and we all adored him. He just taught us so much extra like not just like what was in the textbook but real things like we actually talk about politics and extra things that you wouldn’t normally learn. And then we would do a lot of writing and do workshops and he would let us write about what we wanted and that really helped me make my writing better.
Katherine remembered that another one of her most caring teachers emphasized wanting to learn about Katherine’s interests and preferences. Katherine indicated she was initially hesitant in reciprocating the interaction:

On the first day of class I remember I was just in a bad mood and I did not want to be but she was trying to get to know her students and kept asking questions and I just had a terrible attitude! She made an effort to get to know me and like by the end of the year I was talking to her about where to go to college. I was glad she didn’t let up getting to know me and what I liked.

Alternately, when asked to describe one of her least caring teachers, Katherine remembered a teacher who was not willing to listen to student preferences when making instructional decisions:

It was a math class and I’ve never had a problem with math, but that’s all we did was math, she didn't take any time to talk, joke around, get to know us. She was very hard to connect with just being kind of an older woman—and didn’t really show us any of her personality. I don’t know what her interests were other than math, and I don’t think she knew ours. She just didn’t really take our interests into account for like making decisions about class, or how it’s run, or anything. It was just math every day, like what’s next in the book, do the exercises, do the homework, correct the homework, test, move on.

Katherine continued to characterize this least caring teacher, specifically remembering a movie that the teacher picked for the students to watch. Katherine recalled that the students had very little interest in watching this movie:

She was one of those teachers that nobody else really likes because of those reasons like so none of her personality came through and only like drilling math and discipline. No
one was interested in it she didn’t try to make it interesting; we had a movie day once before break and she picked the movie and it was some like outdated one that we had never heard of!

Kim was very complimentary about her most caring high school teachers in regard to honoring student perspectives. Kim recalled how impressed she was with this teacher in terms of the way the teacher valued Kim’s perspectives and feelings:

This teacher showed a lot of empathy for me. She knew what it was like to be busy and stressed out so it was easy for her to understand why I was feeling that way. She respected me and my thinking, which allowed me to respect her in return. She was good at listening and gave unbiased opinions when you asked her for advice.

Kim later discussed one of her least caring high school teachers. During this portion of the interview, Kim remembered a story about her father’s death and how one particular teacher treated her immediately following the death. Kim recalled that this teacher did not attempt to acknowledge and respect Kim’s perspective and what she was going through as a result of her father’s passing:

My dad died on a Friday and I went back to school on Monday for the next week. My guidance counselor emailed all of the teachers to let them know so he very well knew what was going on. I had had enough stress one day that week and during his class I put my head down on my desk and [the teacher] called me out and told me I needed to put my head up. I told him I didn’t want to take notes and I was not ready to pay attention and he did not care whatsoever and sent me out to the hallway. This did not make me feel any better—worse, actually!
Finally, Leslie discussed her perception of the difference between her most caring and least caring teachers when it came to honoring student perspectives:

Sometimes things at home might reflect your performance in the classroom and if you’re exhibiting care towards your students you understand that there could be a root cause of something going on at home. My [most caring] teachers knew that what is going on at home could have an impact … but the least caring teachers just took it at face value and said, “Well, they just don’t care about the class and they’re being lazy.”

The idea that caring teachers honor student interests and perspectives was referenced 76 times across all interviews as participants discussed perceptions of teacher care. Participants indicated that their most caring teachers had a knack for showing curiosity about student interests and were also adept at understanding the perspectives of their students. When asked to describe their least caring teachers, participants indicated those teachers did not attempt to learn about student interests and made no effort to understand student perspectives.

**Motivational shift is a crucial aspect of teacher care.** Another term that can be used to describe how teachers honor student interests and perspectives is the idea of motivational shift. *Motivational shift* is described as the conscious decision caring teachers make when they shift their attention from their own needs to meeting the individual needs of the students in the classroom (Noddings, 1984). When asked to discuss teacher care, 18 participants referenced aspects of motivational shift to characterize their most caring teachers. With all but two participants mentioning that their most caring teachers shifted their attention from their own needs to the needs of the students, more participants indicated that a teacher implemented ideas of motivational shift than any other approach to caring for students.
Nicole was one of the participants who talked at great length about teachers in regard to honoring student interests and preferences. Nicole discussed both model examples and non-examples of teachers who demonstrated motivational shift by demonstrating sensitivity to students’ unique differences. When describing one of her most caring teachers, Nicole described the following:

She would always like hearing [feedback] from the kids asking them “What would you like me to teach more of? Let me know what you’re interested in.” She would genuinely show interest and she would care for students … so she would just make sure that everyone is genuinely interested in what she was like teaching them and that they’re going to do the best job that they could … in one class she would ask us about our music preferences and would make like a mix-CDs and she would be like, “Write down whatever songs you want and we can listen to these so you’ll be more relaxed while you’re doing your work” so that was nice.

When Nicole described one of her least caring teachers she detailed a completely different approach to honoring student interests and perspectives. Nicole explained that one teacher did not take the time to try and understand where the student was coming from:

She should ask about our personal lives and she shouldn’t be quick to judge people based on who they’re friends with or their family. It’d been nice if she instead of just scolding people all the time if she actually genuinely listened to them and got down to what the issue was for students. This way students would feel more comfortable speaking to her or coming to her if there’s a problem.

The large number of participants who indicated that their teachers honored student interests and perspectives suggests that students are able to recognize when teachers shift their
focus from their own needs to the needs of the student. Given that 18 out of the 20 participants indicated that their most caring teachers demonstrated motivational shift suggests that the most caring high school teachers demonstrate this mindset in their classroom. Additionally, given the frequency at which participants described this theme, it is important that teachers who are disregarding student interests and ignoring student perspectives change their practices for the purpose of demonstrating student care.

**Research Question 2: Comparing Noddings’ Research to Participant Perceptions of Care**

The overarching goal of this research was to explore the role that the ethic of care played in the classroom experience of recent high school graduates. To meet the goal of this research, two research questions were developed. The first research question explored how recent high school graduates characterized the phenomenon of teacher care. Five distinct themes emerged when participants were asked to provide their perceptions of teacher care, with each theme describing a unique characteristic commonly found in participants’ most caring teachers. These themes were explored in the previous section.

In addition to characterizing the phenomenon of teacher care, the second primary purpose of this dissertation was to compare existing ethic of care research against participant perceptions of teacher care. The second research question that guided this dissertation was the following:

*How do features of Noddings’ ethic of care theory compare to the elements of teacher care as described by recent high school graduates?* To answer this research question, dialogue from participant interviews was compared against Noddings’ characteristics of care and activities of a caring teacher (Noddings, 1984). According to Noddings, three specific characteristics of care are needed for a relationship between teacher and student to occur. These characteristics are engrossment, commitment, and motivational shift. Similarly, Noddings identified four activities
of a caring teacher, which are specific actions teachers can utilize to demonstrate care for their students. These activities are modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. These characteristics and activities were previously introduced and defined in Chapter 2 (pp. 31-37).

To help answer the second research question, participant responses that closely resembled or matched Noddings’ description of characteristics of care and activities of a caring teacher were placed together in a data analysis spreadsheet. Participant responses to interview questions specifically addressing Noddings’ research as well as all other participant dialogue that aligned to Noddings’ research were grouped together by characteristic of care or activity of a caring teacher.

Table 5

*Teachers Demonstrating Noddings’ Characteristics and Activities of Care*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Care</th>
<th>Activities of a Caring Teacher</th>
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<tr>
<td>Engrossment</td>
<td>Modeling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivational Shift</td>
<td>Practice</td>
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<td>Confirmation</td>
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Table 5 outlines the number of teachers who participants collectively identified as demonstrating Noddings’ characteristics of care or utilizing Noddings’ activities of a caring teacher in the classroom. Please note that because these aspects of Noddings’ work focused primarily on the features of *caring* teachers, only the dialogue connected to participants’ most caring teachers is provided. Discussion and response to participant dialogue will be provided in Chapter 5.
Engrossment

Engrossment is the first characteristic of care identified by Noddings. Engrossment occurs when the teacher pays close attention to students and the needs of students. Furthermore, engrossment occurs when the teacher acknowledges student feelings and the relevance of student experiences.

Kim was one participant who recalled a most caring high school teacher who demonstrated engrossment. Kim noticed that one of her teachers had a knack for noticing and understanding students’ feelings. When describing this teacher, Kim provided the following:

She showed a lot of empathy for me. She knew what it was like to be busy and stressed out so it was easy for her to understand why I was feeling that way. She respected me and my thinking, which allowed me to respect her in return. She was good at listening and gave unbiased opinions when you asked her for advice.

Leslie described her surprise when one of her most caring teachers showed up to her place of employment, which was across town from where the teacher lived. Leslie indicated how impressed she was that a teacher would drive to her work just to chat:

When I was in high school there was a dress shop in town and I was working there and … I don’t remember how that came about … but I told her that when she is on that side of town to come in and see me. Not really thinking that she would come in, but there was one night after school and I was there and she showed up to surprise me and I just thought that was really sweet. And at the time I don’t think that I realized it but she didn’t even need to do anything. She didn’t live there and drove a long ways across town to go there but she basically came there just to see me. She just went out of her way just to see one of her students. I thought that was cool.
Parker described how one of his most caring teachers demonstrated interest in the lives of students. Similar to Leslie, Parker recalled how this teacher showed interest in the experiences of students. Parker explained that one time his teacher showed up to his soccer game:

My sophomore year, one of my history teachers, I felt really cared about me. He was like really interested in the subject, but he was also really interested in people’s perspectives. He really encouraged structured debate. He wants to hear your reasoning, I always felt that my opinion was validated and not just swept under the rug. He also came to a lot of soccer games. I don’t think he even liked soccer. He just enjoyed seeing the students outside of the school. He was always in the hallway interacting with the kids.

Alyssa was another participant who indicated that one of her most caring teachers demonstrated elements of engrossment. Alyssa recalled how her Spanish teacher made her feel important because of the special attention she would provide:

I couldn’t believe how close she paid attention to what exactly it was that I needed to do well in the class. I mean … she had all of the other students in there but I always felt like she understood how I learned and what I needed help on.

Finally, Chloe recalled that one of her most caring high school teachers was intentional about showing interest in Chloe by interacting with her outside of school. This teacher made arrangements to meet with Chloe and Chloe’s daughter on the weekends:

This is kind of outside of schooling but she would want to like get lunch on the weekends and she would attend my daughter’s birthday party and stuff like that so she was just an all-over good friend and person as well as teacher.

Elements of engrossment were used to describe 38 of the 40 teachers who were identified by participants as their most caring high school teachers. Participants recalled that teachers who
exhibited engrossment respected students’ feelings and perspectives and went to great lengths to demonstrate interest in students’ lives. Participants indicated that they noticed their most caring teachers demonstrated engrossment both during the school day and also outside of the school setting.

**Commitment**

Commitment in the context of teacher care is characterized as a teacher’s dedication to establishing and maintaining a relationship with a student. Furthermore, commitment requires dedication to the relationship by the teacher even during possible student shortcomings.

Alyssa was one of the students who recalled one of her most caring teachers demonstrating commitment. Alyssa explained that one high school teacher in particular was very caring when Alyssa was going through some health problems:

I was very into health and stuff and so she encouraged me to stay healthy. I remember one day I showed up and I was throwing up. She asked me what was going on and I told her that I took some pills to lose some weight. And she sat me down and she told me this was not acceptable and that I was going to hurt myself. She cared a lot about my health.

Kim was another participant who recalled that one of her most caring teachers demonstrated commitment. Kim explained that her teacher showed dedication to the relationship when Kim was really struggling emotionally during a tough week:

My math had a welcoming environment. I remember a specific time where I was having a very stressful week and broke down. She allowed me to sit in her room while she was teaching a different class, gave me some fruit snacks, and finished my homework.
Kim recalled a story about another of her most caring teachers in which the teacher demonstrated commitment. Kim explained how when her family went through a period of significant heartbreak, one teacher in particular helped support the family during the tragic time:

My dad died in a snowmobile accident during my freshman year of high school and this teacher was right alongside our family because he cared so much for us. Before my dad’s accident, he painted and revamped our band trailer so there was an extra special tie between the two of our families. His family also cared for us, as we also cared for them. They brought us dinner on occasion after the accident and understood when it was just one of those days.

Miguel was another student who recalled feeling commitment from a teacher. Miguel remembered that some of his teachers were unsupportive when he revealed to them that he had to be out of school for an extended period of time due to a medical procedure. However, Miguel explained that one of his most caring teachers went out of her way to help Miguel when she realized he was going to be out of school for multiple days:

I was getting my wisdom teeth taken out. I told her about how I was going to be gone. This was after she had been my teacher. She dropped off some chicken noodle soup at my house on the weekend. That was something special that I have never had a teacher do for me. She didn’t have to do that, especially when it was winter. Having that type of attention that I would get from my mom, in the classroom.

Finally, Mariah was one other participant who spoke about commitment during her interview. Mariah described how her teacher stuck by her side after Mariah revealed that she was pregnant:
When I was in my senior year of high school, I was actually pregnant and she was one of the first people I told after my parents because I wasn’t sure where to go to. So I talked to her and she said “oh my goodness, well this is a big change” while some other teachers just complained about me failing. She told me she was excited for me and told me if I needed anything … she came to my baby shower, she came to visit me when my daughter was a couple weeks old. It meant a lot that even though I was in a crappy spot that looked bad, she said “nope, I still love you.” She was so positive about it … she was certain it was going to work and that there was no other option. She actually helped me get all my assignments done so that I could graduate early.

Of the 40 individuals identified as participants’ most caring high school teachers, 33 of the teachers demonstrated attributes that fit the definition of commitment. Participants indicated that their most caring teachers provided encouragement and support for students at all times—even when students were going through significant issues in their life. Examples of these tough times for students included when students were experiencing health issues, when students were having problems at home, and when students were facing difficulties at school.

**Motivational shift**

Motivational shift is the last of Noddings’ characteristics of care. Motivational shift happens when teachers shift attention from their own needs and instead they focus on addressing the needs of the students. Furthermore, motivational shift is characterized as teachers who remove their own desires and instead view the world through the eyes of their students.

At first glance, the definitions of engrossment and motivational shift appear to be quite similar. There are similarities between the two, and they are often paired together in research (e.g., Foster, 2009; Owens & Ennis, 2005). Further exploration of the research suggests the
difference between the two is that engrossment is usually displayed *early* in a relationship when
the teacher establishes a relationship by accepting student feelings and acknowledging the
relevance of student experiences. Alternately, motivational shift is usually displayed *later* in the
relationship after the initial teacher-student relationship has been formed.

Bryan was one of the participants who described that one of his most caring teachers
exhibited motivational shift in her interactions with students. Bryan remembered a teacher who
took time out of a busy class schedule to allow for students to share their work with each other:

We were able to get up on the podium and share. She would take time out of the class to
where we could do that. I’ve had those teachers where you write this long paper and
you’re proud of it and all you do is turn it in … you get it back with a big grade circled at
the top, and that’s it. So we got to share those types of things. I just remember being
proud of some of the work I did. She changed my whole idea about writing. She would
be the A-plus teacher.

Alyssa talked about a teacher who recognized when students needed a break from work
from the day. Instead of forcing students to do the work the teacher wanted the students to
complete, the teacher switched gears and let the students complete an assignment from another
class:

I remember that she said, “We’re not doing papers today—we’re not doing class.” We
were so relieved! She just spent the time talking to us and she also let us do a music
assignment because so many students were in music in her class. She knew that many of
us loved music so she said that we could spend our time working on writing about music.
And they she told us just to do something music involved and to bring it to class and then
we did a 20-minute presentation.
James discussed a teacher who took extra time supplying him with resources and making sure James was doing well both academically and mentally. James remembered that she allowed him to come to her room quite often throughout the day:

Junior year I asked her if I could do mentoring with her and help her with whatever she needed help with in the classroom and so I was her mentee. We had some really good conversations. I took AP Spanish with her as well the next year so I had the opportunity to interact with her a lot and really just going in and having her be there for me academically and help me with whatever I needed to do was nice. Whatever Spanish thing I wanted to learn she would always support me. She would find resources for me and make sure they were available. She took a lot of extra time out of her own schedule to make sure I was good.

Kim also recalled that one of her most caring teachers demonstrated motivational shift. Kim suggested that this teacher worried first about addressing the needs of the students before worrying about her own needs. Kim said, “She was an active listener and consistently showed support when I needed it. She spent time outside of her contract hours to help me with the problems I needed assistance for—she was always willing to help.”

Finally, Trish also indicated that one of her most caring teachers was able to understand the perspectives of her students. Trish explained a story about how her teacher was very understanding when Trish went through a death in the family:

Towards the end of high school my grandpa was becoming very sick and would eventually pass away and she was able to pick up on the fact that there was something going on personally. Maybe that wasn’t something I wanted to share with everyone, but if it was something that was going on in your life—she could pick up on what was going
She would ask if you’d want to talk about it or if you didn’t want to talk about it and would ask if there was anything that she could do. And that was on the good days too—she would notice if you had an extra pep in your step and she would ask about it.

Aspects of motivational shift were used to describe 36 of the 40 teachers who were identified by participants as their most caring high school teachers. Participants indicated that their most caring teachers shifted their focus away from their own personal needs and instead focused on meeting the needs of the students in the classroom.

All three of Noddings’ characteristics of care were frequently seen in the classrooms of the participants’ most caring teachers. Although the terms engrossment, commitment, and motivational shift were unfamiliar to most participants, when provided with definitions of each term the participants acknowledged that these characteristics were commonly displayed by the teachers who demonstrated high levels of care when working with students.

**Modeling**

According to Noddings, modeling is one of the four most common actions that teachers use to demonstrate care to their students. Modeling in the context of teacher care is when teachers demonstrate to students what care looks like when they interact with other individuals. When students see a teacher have a caring interaction with another student or employee, students begin to understand what caring looks like (Noddings, 1984).

Miguel was one of the participants who vividly remembered the modeling of care he saw from one of his most caring teachers. Miguel indicated that this teacher was warm and kind to every person, therefore modeling care to the students who saw her interactions. Miguel recalled the following:
I remember her motherly instincts. I remember her body language—she always kept eye contact with the person she was talking to. Having individualized attention with one person. Enthusiasm, and a lot of hand waving. She was in a wheelchair so she always had to move around. She was a paraplegic. She would wheel herself around and make sure we’re doing what we’re supposed to. She would get pumped up, give high fives. Not only with her students, but with her colleagues as well.

Anthony recalled how one of his most caring teachers modeled care to Anthony and a group of students through the teacher’s financial generosity. Anthony explained that this teacher would take Anthony and the other students out for lunch and pay for the entire meal. This modeling of care was something that Anthony will always remember:

He took us out on a meal, to Hibachi, on several occasions. It was real cool for lunch, it was just like everybody in the class, and he would pay for everything. I couldn’t believe he did that for us—no other teacher I had showed so much love to students. It was like 8 people! This was during school time. We would go to the office and he would say, “Hey, we’re all going out to lunch as this class, and we’ll come back before the next class begins.”

Leslie explained that one of her most caring teachers modeled caring behavior when the teacher interacted with students. Leslie indicated that this individual treated every student the same:

I feel like she basically acted the same way to everyone regardless of, you know, how much or little she knew about them. Or even if it was the worst student she had she still always acted the same—caring, compassionate, patient. Like obviously in the moment if
the student was acting out or misbehaving in class she probably was a little bit flustered at the time, but the next day it never affected her opinion of that person.

Finally, Erica also discussed how one of her most caring teachers modeled what caring should look like during every interaction she had with students. Erica explained the following:

I remember like everyone she talked to you could just tell she was a great role model because she was so warm and caring with everyone. Not just the good students—like all students that she interacted with she modeled care.

Across all interviews, participants indicated that 36 of their 40 most caring high school teachers demonstrated modeling of care to students. Participants indicated that their most caring teachers modeled care to students by using caring interactions with all individuals. Whereas other teachers might have treated some people differently than others, participants explained that their most caring teachers were warm, friendly, and respectful to everyone.

**Dialogue**

Dialogue is another example of an activity that a teacher might use to demonstrate care to his or her students. Dialogue refers to a teacher who listens, shares ideas, and thoughtfully responds to student questions. Dialogue also describes when a teacher intentionally engages students in conversations for the purpose of demonstrating interest in students’ lives.

Bryan was one participant who talked about teachers who used dialogue in the classroom. Bryan appreciated teachers who demonstrated care by talking to students about their interests. When asked if he believed his most caring teacher engaged students in dialogue, Bryan explained the following:

Yeah sure—with all of the writing and stuff … she wanted us to write about our interests so then she would hear about those interests when we are sharing at the podium. She is
reading about what we are writing and our interests so she is picking up on those things that we like to do. And then she would share her own ideas about our writing. So for me it was sports. I also remember writing about movies. I thought I was a movie-reviewer so I would write about that. I know she could pick up on those interests for sure and talk to me about what I liked. So in return I was trying to do better with my writing.

James recalled that one of his most caring teachers would make an intentional effort to engage students in dialogue. James discussed how this particular teacher showed genuine interest in the wellbeing of James’ family members:

He would always try to make sure he knew us pretty well so he would ask about our family. My mom knew him really well—she drove a school bus. He would always go through her for a school bus. So he would ask me about my mom randomly and ask how she was.

Leslie recalled that one of her most caring teachers would often engage students in dialogue by asking students about their lives outside of school. When asked if she believed this particular teacher engaged students in dialogue, Leslie said the following:

Yeah I would say so. She would ask about family or just like, “Oh, what are you going to do for the weekend?” Or, if we had just gotten back from a holiday she would ask what all we did. She would go around the room and ask, “What’s your favorite thing about [a topic or a student interest]?” That was her favorite way to get to know about each of her students in the classroom.

Tamara recalled that one of her most caring teachers was able to develop dialogue with students through the use of personality tests. After the tests had been given, Tamara indicated that the teacher would engage with students based on the results of the tests:
I had him again later on my junior year for Sociology class and we did some personality tests and it gives you feedback on what your personality is. I remember at the time I thought I was a Type B personality but I remember him saying “You’re definitely Type A” because I really did care about my grades and studying. I had really bad test anxiety and he would tell me I was going to do fine and not to worry—I probably had spent more time studying than anyone else. He was comforting and caring in that sense.

Finally, Mariah was another student who recalled the dialogue she exchanged with one of her most caring teachers. Mariah explained how she appreciated the conversations she would have with one particular teacher. Mariah remembered that this teacher gave her relationship advice as well as advice for selecting high school courses:

I would stay after school a lot and talk to her … chatting about where I wanted to go to college or what my relationship status was or talk about my boyfriend. She would always tell me if she didn’t think something was a good idea. She was a guiding force … besides my mom she was another person I could talk to. She would talk to me about what classes I should take and would tell me if I was too smart for a class and would recommend that I take another class instead.

Participants indicated that 36 of the 40 teachers who were identified as a most caring high school teacher utilized dialogue in their classroom. Participants explained their most caring teachers spent time talking to students about subjects that were of interest to students.

Participants suggested that their most caring teachers intentionally set aside time to interact and get to know the students in their classroom, while other teachers might not have spent time on similar interactions.
Practice

Practice in terms of teacher care is when a teacher creates opportunities for students that foster cooperation, sharing, and other chances for student collaboration. Practice allows students to expand their abilities to receive and give care.

Erica was one of the participants who recalled having the opportunity to practice care in the classroom. When asked if one of her most caring teachers allowed students to practice caring, Erica recalled that the teacher created an atmosphere where it was commonplace to work together with other students:

She created an atmosphere where at the end of the semester all of the students had no problem sharing their work with others and talking to one another. At that point we had no problems reading to each other and helping each other out.

Brittany was another participant who remembered having the chance to practice care in the classroom of one of her most caring teachers. Brittany explained that practice was done during lab work in a science class:

We did a lot of partner work in science—a lot of labs. I remember I wouldn’t want the other person to fail. She would grade everyone as a group and we had to work together and I cared about how other people did not just myself.

Mariah recalled having the opportunity to practice care in the class of one of her most caring teachers. Mariah explained that the teacher created an atmosphere in the classroom where students were expected to learn the material and then be able to teach the content to others:

In her class she would say “Here’s what we’re going to do today” and then she would have us teach it to the person next to us. We had to take what we learned and actually use it and just not remember what she told us to do. We actually had to teach somebody. We
actually had to go and teach the lower levels and tell them what to do and had to tell them about the skills they needed and when to pay attention.

Another participant who discussed having the opportunity to practice care was Bryan. Bryan discussed how one of his most caring teachers utilized group work to allow students to demonstrate care to one another:

Growing up the teacher says, “Talk with your partner.” Sometimes that ends up being you end up giving each other the answer because you don’t know. But he taught us about—he referenced college a lot. He told us that there’s no problem with getting help but there is a problem with giving answers. That’s another thing that stuck with me. He understood that a lot of times you get answers from a friend and move on. But we worked on the whole social skills of how to discuss, how to explain what you’re thinking. Once again, I feel like that was a new thing for a high school math teacher. He was one of those types that helped develop our social skills for the future.

Sophia was one other individual who discussed the opportunity she had to practice care in the classroom of one of her most caring teachers. Sophia explained that collaborating with other students was an everyday occurrence:

We did a lot of group work … like almost every day there was some kind of group work. So like that was a circumstance where we had opportunities to demonstrate care especially when we were trying to solve problems together. But when it was working with people I didn’t necessarily know, there were the opportunities to cooperate. I guess in that sense that in itself would be practicing care because we did have to work together. So I’d say because we had to because we had to acknowledge everyone else and give
people the opportunity to help add to the end result and to contribute to the overall goal of the group, I would say that was a form of practicing care.

Of the 40 teachers who were identified by participants as a most caring high school teacher, participants cumulatively indicated that 32 of those teachers utilized practice in their classrooms. When asked to describe how their most caring teachers allowed students to practice care, participants focused primarily on collaborative work. Examples of collaborative work included when teachers allowed students to work on assignments, projects, and assessments with partners or in groups.

**Confirmation**

Confirmation occurs when teachers encourage their students to achieve at high levels both in school and outside of school. Additionally, confirmation happens when teachers provide support for their students as students work toward goals and pursue ambitions.

Anthony was one participant who remembered the confirmation he received from one of his most caring teachers. Anthony explained that this teacher always held students to high expectations. Anthony described the following:

He would always try to push us to our limits. Once we reached that limit, go find a new one and try to accomplish that. Never stop working toward higher goals basically. He was really just saying, “Hey, I know you can do this little amount of work, but if you go over here, do this, this is the best for you, and it’s going to make you better in the long run.” He was always trying to push us to think about the future and not just think about the present.
Katherine also discussed ideas of confirmation when she was asked to describe one of her most caring teachers. Katherine recalled that she felt encouraged to take on difficult challenges that were given to her by one teacher in particular:

I really fed off of words of affirmation and wanting to please people. He was one of the few teachers that just didn’t automatically say, “Ok she’s doing great she gets an A.” He challenged me to do more and he gave me tougher topics. Just since he saw that I could easily do whatever it was—you know, like a simple 5 paragraph essay—he would challenge me to take on tougher assignments.

Kim was another participant who recalled that one of her most caring teachers used confirmation when working with students. According to Kim, this particular teacher sensed when students were not giving their all and pushed students to work at higher levels:

I got a C on the first test and was ready to give up and [my teacher] promised me that she would do all that she can to work with me to get my grade up from a D to at least a B and she definitely did. When I got distracted during class or work time, she was not afraid to do what she needed to do to get me back on track which made me want to stay on task.

James also discussed how one of his most caring teachers demonstrated faith in James that he could achieve at high levels. James explained that this teacher believed in James, even when James didn’t necessarily believe in himself:

If you turned in something that was not your best quality or best effort in his eyes or according to his rubrics he would always ask if it was the best we could do because he knew we could do better. So he would always see if we could work harder and he could push us without us really realizing it. I didn’t really think I had it in me but he always told me I did.
Finally, Brittany recalled that one of her most caring teachers demonstrated characteristics of confirmation in her classroom. Brittany discussed being pushed by this teacher when working on a difficult research project:

At first everyone complained about that research project. But he said that we had to do it and he would help us out. Our research project was about what we wanted to do in the future so we had to figure that out and write it. It was a long project—it took a while to do it. But he was always encouraging us to keep going even though it was hard.

When participants were asked whether or not confirmation had occurred in the classrooms of their two most caring teachers, participants indicated that 37 of the 40 most caring teachers demonstrated confirmation when working with students. Participants indicated that their most caring teachers provided students with the confidence needed to reach high levels of success both in the classroom and in personal endeavors.

All four of Noddings’ activities of a caring teacher were frequently seen in the classrooms of the participants’ most caring teachers. Although the participants did not specifically utilize the terms modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation to describe the activities used by these teachers, when provided with a description of each activity the participants recalled that it was common for their most caring teachers to use these approaches in the classroom.

**Consideration of Disconfirming Evidence**

Disconfirming evidence should be considered when examining this research on the phenomenon of teacher care. Disconfirming evidence is the process where investigators first establish the preliminary themes in a study and then search through the data for evidence that disconfirms the themes (Creswell, 2000). The disconfirming evidence that emerged in this
research revolved around contradictory interpretations of teacher care provided during participant interviews. During interviews, participants were asked to identify and characterize two of their most caring high school teachers and also identify and characterize two of their least caring high school teachers. As the dialogue from the various participant interviews was grouped together, a pattern began to emerge as several participants indicated that they believed other students did not share their perceptions of caring teachers. More specifically, some participants believed their “most caring” teachers were viewed much less favorably by other students in terms of the care those teachers showed for students. Likewise, some participants believed their “least caring” teachers were viewed much more favorably by other students in terms of the care those teachers showed for students.

Overall, participants explained that 29 of the 77 teachers who were discussed during interviews drew mixed reviews in terms of the care those teachers demonstrated towards students. The stories participants shared about their most caring and least caring teachers revealed that different groups of students had adopted extreme opposing opinions of these 29 teachers. Because of the noticeably divided perceptions students had of these teachers, they will be referred to as polarizing teachers in this study. Table 6 provides a breakdown of the polarizing teachers who were discussed during participant interviews.

Table 6

*Breakdown of Polarizing Teachers*

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<tr>
<th>Number of Participants Who Discussed a Polarizing Teacher</th>
<th>Total Number of Polarizing Teachers Discussed</th>
<th>Polarizing Teachers Identified as a “Most Caring” Teacher by Participants</th>
<th>Polarizing Teachers Identified as a “Least Caring” Teacher by Participants</th>
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Thirteen teachers who were identified by participants as a most caring teacher fit the definition of a polarizing teacher in terms of the care students felt from these teachers. Erica was one participant who believed that her most caring teacher drew mixed feelings from students. When asked to describe one of her most caring teachers, Erica discussed a science teacher she had senior year:

You know there are two polar opposites—she’s the type of teacher that is very straightforward and she didn’t sugarcoat things and she would give you help if you wanted it, but she would never sit down and hold your hand. She would tell us “okay you need to get this done. I’ll be here if you have questions.” So I could see how other students did not find her as caring as I did. Either you really loved her and you appreciated that or you really hated her because you are used to teachers that hold your hand and are super nice.

Courtney was another participant who indicated one of her most caring teachers was not thought to be caring by all students. As Courtney discussed her science teacher and the care she felt from this teacher, she also admitted that her peers displayed mixed opinions in terms of the care they felt:

I remember there was a split-divide of people who loved her and people who didn’t like her, which was really interesting because I had already known her for a couple years and I’d already developed a good relationship with her. She taught chemistry which was a really difficult subject for some people. So I don’t know if it was the content that drove people away, or if it was her actual teaching, so I don’t know. But there was definitely a split of people that loved her and people that didn’t think she was very caring.
Mariah recalled an English teacher who she believed was one of her most caring high school teachers. However, Mariah recalled that student perceptions were split in terms of the care students felt from this teacher:

He was about fifty-fifty … some people would call him the best teacher they ever had, but others would say that he was terrible and that they couldn’t stand him. My mom actually had him as a teacher, and so did my sister. And all three of us love him. However all of us were also very outgoing. But, he rubbed some people the wrong way. The students that had trouble being told what to do had problems with him. The students that had problems with rules … they did not like him because he enforced the rules and he would tell them if they were breaking the rules.

Tamara remembered a social studies teacher she had during her junior year that she considered to be one of her most caring teachers. However, Tamara admitted that other students might not have felt the same amount of care that Tamara did from this teacher:

You either loved him or you hated him. He’s a pretty straightforward guy … it almost comes off as like a strictness … it’s so hard to explain. He's kind of messing with you but at the same time he’s kind of extreme with the way he teaches. He wants to really get your attention with certain things. He always brought a little bit of life or intensity to social studies, which I really liked. Like I said ... you either loved him or you hated him.

Alternately, 16 teachers who were identified by participants as a least caring teacher also fit the definition of a polarizing teacher in terms of student care. Anthony recalled a math teacher from his senior year that he referred to as a least caring high school teacher. While Anthony did not feel much care from this particular teacher, he believed there were other students who had a different opinion in terms of the care they felt from this teacher:
He cared for some students—the students that understood the lesson. The people that he didn’t really have to worry about. The people that had more questions about the lessons were the ones that bothered him. I also witnessed a lot of times when he was really rude to other students. But he would only really try to show more care toward people that were a part of his clubs and did well in class. I think those people felt care from him. The people that didn’t do well in his class he basically didn’t show care for.

Sophia was another participant who described mixed feelings in terms of the teacher care that one teacher displayed. Sophia distinctly remembered a social studies teacher who she referred to as a least caring teacher. Despite personally being unimpressed with the amount of care the teacher displayed, Sophia admitted that other students did not share her opinion of this teacher:

I’m not sure he actually learned my name. There wasn’t any reason for me to raise my hand to answer questions—I felt like I was very invisible in the class. I was also an underclassman in the class so that that mentality also affected things. But I didn’t feel like there was any kind of individual attention. I feel like I could have disappeared from the class he wouldn’t have noticed. So that was the biggest issue I had in feeling that he didn’t care … but there were [students] that he talked to that he would have conversations with during class or before class and things like that. So, for them, I think he did display that he was caring for them—especially if they were students in his advisory. These were people he had a chance to see on a daily basis. Those were people that he showed care towards and that felt care from him. But I didn’t feel the same way—not even close.
Trish described a high school teacher who she referred to as one of her least caring teachers. Trish remembered that she was turned off by the humor this particular teacher used with students. However, Trish recalled there were other students who responded more positively to the humor:

So I had him for one semester in high school and every student did. It was one of those classes that every student has to take. [The teacher and my] personalities were just so different and you could just tell right away. I think he thought he was really funny … and some students responded really, really well to his humor … but some students were totally offended by it. I was one of those students.

Participants explained that a number of the teachers they had in high school drew mixed reviews in terms of the care they demonstrated for students. These teachers who had different groups of students adopt opposing opinions in terms of the care they showed for students are referred to as polarizing teachers in this research. Both sets of teachers—teachers who were identified as most caring and teachers who were identified as least caring—included individuals who were identified as polarizing by participants.

**Polarizing sports coaches**

As the contradictory interpretations of teacher care were explored, another pattern that emerged were the different perspectives participants provided when discussing the care they felt from teachers who were also sports coaches. Jason was one of the participants who spoke very highly about a teacher he had in high school who was also a coach. Jason recalled that he believed this coach was very caring as he helped him come to the realization that he should attend college. However, Jason also recalled that other students did not feel this same way about this particular coach:
One of the most caring teachers I can think of was my football coach—he really turned me around. I used to only really care about sports and I really didn’t care about going to college at all. And then he came in and became the head coach my junior year. He taught a lot of the science classes, he was really smart and he really showed me that you could be good at sports and also be good in school. But he did take more to the athletes because he was a football coach. He was a person that either students loved him or hated him. The guys that seem to like him were the athletes. He kind of catered more to the athlete and made sure that they were on track and would make sure that kids who wouldn’t be able to play because their grades weren’t good enough got the help they needed so they could play. So I think kids that maybe were not athletes he didn’t pay as much attention to and those kids didn’t feel the care from this coach that I did when I was in high school.

Participants also characterized teachers who were also sports coaches as some of their least caring teachers. When asked to describe one of his least caring high school teachers, Parker recalled a history teacher and sports coach he had during his junior year. Parker described the care this coach would display toward athletes and the lack of care he would display toward non-athletes:

This was a history teacher—I think I had her for junior and senior year. I don’t know how she got into teaching, because she wasn’t very effective. I think she was more into it for the coaching because she seemed to like that a lot more. She was actually very friendly which was kind of the confusing part. But she was noticeably more personable with the people that played sports. She was personable with me but it was always in a
way that was off topic or nonproductive. She seemed more caring for you as a person, but not so much as a student.

Sophia also described a coach when asked to characterize teacher care. When asked to identify a least caring teacher, Sophia discussed a biology teacher who was also a track coach. She explained that one student in the class appeared to have the teacher’s full attention, which led to others in the class not feeling cared-for by the teacher.

He was actually the biology teacher my 10th grade year. At the time he was the reason why I decided I hated science. I had had a negative experience my 9th grade year but 10th grade kind of sealed the deal. He was also the track coach. In my class we had the track star so the majority of the time in class all I remember was him telling us to write definitions from the book or answer questions in the textbook and then he would go and talk to the track star. So yeah—I’m sure the track star felt care along with other the other track athletes. But I didn’t feel any care from him.

Similar to how participant perceptions were split in term of the care students felt from individual teachers, participant perceptions of the care students felt from sports coaches were also divided. While some participants identified coaches as their most caring teachers, other participants identified coaches as their least caring teachers.

**High- and low-achieving students**

This idea that there were a large number of teachers who were polarizing in terms of the care students felt from these teachers was one of the most important findings to consider from this study. A closer look at the participant dialogue indicated there were two different groups of students who had decidedly different views about the teacher care they received. One group of students identified by participants as having different views on teacher care were the high- and
low-achieving students. It appears that students who did well in some classes felt differently compared to students who did poorly in terms of the care they felt from the teacher.

Tamara was one of the participants who spoke about this divide when it came to the care that students felt from a certain teacher. When Tamara spoke about one of her most caring teachers, she discussed a teacher who taught a class in which Tamara did very well. However, Tamara indicated that not all students in this class felt care from the teacher:

I think it had to go along with the effort that you showed in his classroom. The amount of respect that you showed him kind of determined how you would interact with him if that makes sense. It was an advanced course, so overall everyone was higher achieving that was in his class. But if they weren’t living up to the expectations of being in an advanced class … those would be the ones that he would clash with a little bit more. Those were the ones who didn’t feel they were cared-for.

Leslie was one of the participants who discussed a polarizing teacher from the eyes of someone who struggled in the class. When Leslie discussed one of her least caring teachers, she revealed that other students who excelled in the class described this teacher as caring:

I just remember so many times in class being put on the spot … he just made me feel really uncomfortable and made me feel like he didn’t care. I guess in high school I wasn’t that confident of a person anyways so him calling me out like that obviously did not help. But if you were a good student and maybe you got the material naturally or it just came to you and it just clicked he was fine with you. Or even outside of the class like in the hallway or during lunch duty it was kind of like you had an “in” with him if you were an all-star student. I think those students felt cared-for. But I wasn’t one of those people.
An explanation for the differences of opinion that Tamara and Leslie share might be that students who struggle in a class may inherently feel like the teacher does not care for them as compared to someone who may be doing well in the class. While this may be the case, Noddings (1984) suggests that caring teachers should demonstrate commitment to the student, which includes dedication to the student even during difficult times.

To provide further context on the idea of polarizing teachers, it is helpful to examine participant dialogue describing participants’ “most caring” teachers who also happened to be polarizing teachers according to the participant. Thirteen teachers were identified as a most caring teacher as well as a polarizing teacher. Of those 13 teachers, 12 of those teachers were identified as teachers who pushed students academically, or teachers who showed students “tough love.” Participants who discussed these teachers had great admiration for them and felt substantial amounts of care from these teachers. However, it appears that students who did not respond well to being pushed did not have the same feelings of care from these teachers.

Anthony was one of the students who discussed a teacher who was known at his school for pushing students very hard to make sure that students were successful. While Anthony responded well to this approach, he suggested that this teacher was a little too involved for other students:

Man—I loved the guy! He pushed me so hard to get my work done. I needed that. That was how I was raised … hard work gets the job done. You know? But other students … man they hated him. They would get into arguments. He was too much sometimes.

This did not mean that teachers who demonstrated care for all students did not also push students academically. Several of the participants indicated that teachers who demonstrated care for all students were also able to hold students to high standards. Trish was one of the students
who indicated that a teacher who “showed care to all students” was also able to push students in a way that came across as positive and encouraging. Trish said, “She pushed us but pushed us in a good way. Like some teachers push you and you are turned-off … but she got the best out of you. I don’t know anyone who didn’t respond well to her.”

The data collected in this research indicates that there is a fine line when it comes to teachers pushing students academically and holding students to high standards. Teachers who demonstrated care for some students were able to push some students to meet high academic standards, but found that other students became disengaged because they did not feel the support or care. Teachers who demonstrated care for all students, which will be talked about later in this section, were able to push students to meet high standards while also demonstrating support and kindness.

**Athletes and non-athletes**

Another group of students identified by participants as having different views on teacher care were the athletes and the non-athletes. It appears that students who were athletes felt differently compared to students who were non-athletes in terms of the care they felt from the teacher. Whereas the differences high- and low-performing students felt did not result in any teacher patterns, the differences athletes and non-athletes appeared to be centered on teachers who were sports coaches.

Tamara recalled that one of her most caring teachers also coached in the school. Tamara recalled that she and the coach had lengthy conversations about common interests, which Tamara believed led to her feeling very cared-for by this coach. However, she recalled that the non-athletes did not share as much in common and did not have similar conversations. Tamara
suspected that the lack of shared common interests led to other students not feeling as cared-for by this coach:

Even though he was one of my most caring teachers, I would say that some students wouldn’t have classified him necessarily as a caring teacher. He was very sarcastic and to the point—which I like … this might sound bad but I feel like athletes or more outgoing personalities maybe got along a little bit better with him because we had more in common. He was a coach. He wasn’t ever my coach, but he coached certain things so we had that common interest. And we would talk about those common interests all the time. I’m pretty sure other students did not have those conversations like we did.

Courtney described a vastly different scenario when she spoke about one of her least caring teachers who also coached sports. While Courtney discussed the lack of care she felt from this teacher, she indicated that other students in the class felt differently about the care they felt from this individual:

He was also a football coach and I had him fall semester so his mind was on football. He was preparing for Friday night and thinking about practice. He was making sure that his football guys were in good shape. If you’re passionate about football fine, but it shouldn’t come into the classroom. I just never felt like he really cared enough to help me because I remember asking my mom if she could find me a tutor or something because I just didn’t get it. And he never took the time to ask if everybody understood the material … it was confusing. He would just say “here is what it is, take a look at the book, and turn in your paper” and that was it—there was nothing outside of that. Everyone was treated this way except for the football players they seem to get the
preferential treatment. I just remember thinking that he doesn’t explain anything and he only cares about football.

The pattern of participants identifying coaches as polarizing teachers was another major finding of this research. Participants considered five coaches to be their most caring teachers, but acknowledged that other students probably did not feel as much care from the teacher. Alternately, participants considered eight coaches to be their least caring teachers, but acknowledged that other students may have felt much more care from the teacher.

**Teachers who demonstrate care for all students**

Along with the high number of teachers who received mixed reviews from participants in terms of the care those teachers demonstrated towards students, there was another pattern that emerged in terms of student perceptions of teacher care. Some participants identified teachers who they believed demonstrated care for *all* students. Overall, participants identified 14 teachers who they believed demonstrated care for all students. Participants indicated that there was a general feeling among their peers that these teachers showed their care to all students at all times, regardless of student differences in areas such as academic ability or behavioral attitude.

Table 7 provides a breakdown of participant perceptions of teacher care. More specifically, teachers are compared according to the following categories: teachers who demonstrated care for all students; teachers who demonstrated care for no students; teacher who were identified as polarizing; and teachers who did not have enough information given by the participant to make a determination.
Table 7

*Participant Perceptions of Teacher Care Demonstrated Towards All Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers Discussed</th>
<th>Teachers Who Demonstrated Care for All Students</th>
<th>Teachers Who Demonstrated Care for No Students</th>
<th>Teachers identified as “Polarizing”</th>
<th>Not Enough Information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>77</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
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Mariah was one of the participants who discussed a teacher who approached student care in such a way that all students felt care from this teacher. Mariah explained that even the “bad” students felt care from this teacher:

She’s the best. Everybody would say the same exact thing—there was nobody that didn’t love her or feel care from her. And there wasn’t anybody that she didn’t love or show care for. There was nobody, you could talk to anybody—even the kid that was doing horrible in class—everyone loved her. I don’t think she’s human if that’s possible.

Showing care for all students should be the end goal for a teacher who demonstrates an ethic of caring in the classroom (Noddings, 1984). Given this goal for teachers in terms of care, it was important to look for a pattern that separated teachers who demonstrated care for all students from all other teachers. The most apparent pattern that was found was that all teachers who demonstrated care for all students were also identified as teachers who always displayed a positive and optimistic attitude (see Appendix G). Stated another way, this study indicates that it is unlikely that high school students will consider a teacher who does not display a positive and optimistic attitude as a teacher who demonstrates care for all students. The concept of polarizing teachers will be discussed in the Recommendations for Research section in Chapter 5.
Summary

This chapter examined the research findings from the qualitative interviews and explored participant responses pertaining to both research questions. The first research question explored how participants characterized the phenomenon of teacher care. This study documented that five themes emerged when participants discussed teacher care. Participants indicated that their most caring teachers utilized the following approaches in their classrooms: caring teachers provide descriptive feedback on student work; caring teachers provide assistance when students struggle to understand course content; caring teachers engage students in conversations about post-high school ambitions; caring teachers display positive and optimistic attitudes; and caring teachers honor student interests and perspectives.

The second research question explored how features of Noddings’ ethic of care theory compared to participants’ perceptions of teacher care. Participant dialogue revealed tight alignment between Noddings’ research and participant dialogue. Participants indicated that Noddings’ characteristics of care and activities of a caring teacher were present in almost all of their most caring teachers’ classrooms.

Finally, consideration of disconfirming evidence was presented as contradictory interpretations about the most caring and least caring teachers were described. Participant dialogue revealed that a number of teachers drew mixed reviews from students in terms of the care that students felt from those teachers. Furthermore, sports coaches were identified by participants as teachers who were often polarizing in terms of the care they demonstrated towards students.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter begins with a discussion on the theoretical significance of the findings in this research. Next, findings of the two overarching research questions will be explored, along with connections to the existing literature in the area of teacher care. Special focus will compare student perceptions of teacher care with Noddings’ ethic of care research. Next, implications for both teachers and school administrators will follow, with a specific focus on promoting the ethic of care to all students. The final section of this chapter offers a series of recommendations for further research.

Theoretical Significance

Ethic of care theory contends that the development of caring teacher-student relationships is central to supporting students’ academic achievement (Noddings, 1984). Following the work of other educational studies that used the ethic of care as a theoretical framework (e.g., Cassidy & Bates 2005; Rabin, 2008; Shafer, 2015), this study was created with the purpose of examining how recent high school graduates interpreted the care they received from their former high school teachers.

One of Noddings’ most notable declarations in regard to her ethic of care theory was that the primary aim of every educational institution must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring (Noddings, 1992). Furthermore, Noddings asserted that “[t]he first job of the schools is to care for our children” (p. xiv) and that by placing students at the center of the educational process they need to be nurtured and encouraged.

A comparison between the findings of this research and Noddings’ declarations resulted in tight alignment in a couple of areas. First, this study supports Noddings’ claim that educational institutions must maintain and enhance caring. The difference in the participants’
stories as they transitioned from describing their experiences in the classrooms of their most
caring teachers to the experiences in the classrooms of their least caring teachers was notable.
Several participants indicated that their most caring teachers made such an impact on their lives
that the participants are still currently feeling those positive effects. Alternately, many
participants indicated that their least caring teachers made a negative impact on their lives—the
effects of which are still experienced.

To provide context to this claim, it is helpful to examine participant dialogue. Over half
of the participants indicated that a conversation they had with one of their most caring teachers
affected college choice and selection of educational major. Additionally, many of the
participants who referenced conversations about post-secondary plans indicated those
discussions would not have happened had there not been a strong relationship between teacher
and student. On the other hand, several of the participants indicated that their least caring
teachers made the participants dislike or even “hate” a particular subject. Furthermore, some
participants indicated they dropped out of a course taught by a teacher who did not demonstrate
care toward students. Given the lasting influence teacher care had on participants in this study,
Noddings’ belief that the primary aim for schools should be the maintenance of caring appears to
be a reasonable declaration.

The second part of Noddings’ declaration that was brought to life in this research was the
idea about the “focus” of education. Noddings’ suggestion that students should be placed at the
center of the educational process—as opposed to the educational process revolving around the
teacher—is supported by this research and is one of the essential ideas that the reader should take
from this study. Many of the patterns found in the participant dialogue suggest that students
believe teachers need to be intentional in reaching out to students in an attempt to engage the
student. This is opposed to the idea that students should be intentional in reaching out to the teacher in an attempt to engage the teacher.

For example, three of the five themes that emerged when addressing the first research question suggest that a teacher who operates through an ethic of care should make an attempt to connect with the student instead of waiting for the student to connect with the teacher. These three themes include *caring teachers provide descriptive feedback on student work*, *caring teachers provide assistance when students struggle to understand course content*, and *caring teachers engage students in conversations about post-high school ambitions*.

This notion that the teacher demonstrates care by reaching out to the student in the classroom setting cannot be overstated. Numerous participants indicated that their most caring high school teachers were intentional in making contact with the student. Alternately, numerous participants indicated that their least caring teachers assumed the students would make contact with the teacher. This research suggests that when teachers assume that students will reach out to them if they have a question or need help, often the result is that the student does not end up approaching the teacher. Consequently, because the student does not approach the teacher, the teacher remains unaware that the student has a question or needs help.

Throughout my experience as a school administrator I have heard teachers indicate, “It is the student’s responsibility to come to me to ask questions or get help.” Both Noddings’ research and this research suggest that the idea that it is the student’s responsibility to engage the teacher is inaccurate and flawed. All twenty of the participants in this research indicated that they appreciated a teacher who was willing to reach out to the students. Even the highest performing students in this study indicated that they preferred a teacher who took steps to engage with students, instead of the other way around.
Another similar idea of Noddings’ that emerged in the participant dialogue was the claim that teachers need to get to know their students in order to understand what approach to caring works best for each student. Noddings (1992) suggested that teachers who operate through an ethic of care are intentional about getting to know their students so that they know which interactional approach—“warm and fuzzy” or tough love—works best for each individual student. Some of the participants explained that their most caring teachers were those teachers who were sensitive and sympathetic at all times, while other participants indicated that their most caring teachers were those who were demanding and held students to high standards. Just as how Noddings’ suggested that one approach does not work for every student when it comes to teacher care, this study also found that students’ most caring teachers were those who adapted to the needs of the students.

Noddings’ (1984) concept of ethical caring played an important role in this research. Noddings explained that ethical caring requires an effort on behalf of an individual to provide care for another person. As opposed to natural caring which is a type of care that is often demonstrated between family members, ethical caring is often found in professions where caring for others is a requirement of the job. Noddings proposed that although a teacher may not necessarily want to care for a student, the teacher should feel the ethical need to care for the student given his or her profession.

The idea of teachers demonstrating ethical caring was a prevalent theme that was revealed during this research. Participants regularly alluded to the fact that ethical caring often separated caring and non-caring teachers. Similar to the idea of a teacher being intentional about reaching out to students instead of waiting for the student to approach the teacher, ethical caring also refers to the teacher making the ethical decision to reach out and help a struggling student.
Similar to ethical caring are the ideas surrounding ethical dilemmas teachers face in the classroom. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2012) suggested that four ethical perspectives have been developed to help explain how teachers go about making ethical classroom decisions: ethic of justice, ethic of critique, ethic of care, and ethic of the profession. While all ethical perspectives play a role in the decisions teachers make, this study focused on how teachers use the ethic of care to make ethical decisions in the classroom.

Noddings (2005) proposed when teachers approach an ethical dilemma through an ethic of care, they ask themselves questions through a lens of caring. Two questions teachers who operate through an ethic of care might ask are the following: “Who will be helped by my decision?” and “Who will be hurt by my decision?” This research supports the idea that caring teachers are cognizant of the feelings of individual students when decisions are made. Participants indicated that their most caring teachers were sensitive to all students in the classroom, and were careful to consider students’ feelings when making decisions. Alternately, participants indicated that their least caring teachers did not appear to consider student feelings when decisions were made. Instead of approaching ethical dilemmas using an ethic of care, participants indicated that their least caring teachers often relied upon rigid rules and procedures for making decisions.

Another big picture in terms of how this study informs current teacher care literature is the idea that a teacher must build a caring relationship with a student before attempting to hold the student accountable. Kleinfeld (1972) suggested for a teacher to demand academic excellence from his or her students, the teacher must first build a warm and personal relationship with the student. Only after the teacher has built a relationship with the student can the teacher actively demand a high level of academic work from the student. Other studies (e.g., Chiu &
Tulley, 1997; McCombs & Miller, 1997; Wubbels et al., 1999) also referred to this idea of connection before correction.

Similar to previous research on teacher care, participants in this study indicated that connection before correction was an important step in the teacher-student relationship. Participants indicated that before a teacher could push a student to perform at a high level, behave a certain way, or engage in certain conversations, the teacher must first build a meaningful relationship with the student. While participants admitted that some students might respond well to the teacher regardless if a relationship has been formed, participants indicated that most students require a relationship with the teacher before the student will respond positively to teacher demands.

The idea of teacher flexibility is another key concept that emerged in this research that informs the literature on teacher care. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) presented research that discussed the different types of classroom learning environments that are typically seen in schools. One of the learning environment types that Tomlinson and Imbeau discussed was an orderly/enabling classroom. Tomlinson and Imbeau proposed that the most effective classroom learning environments are orderly/enabling classrooms—classrooms where teachers demonstrate flexibility in accommodating individual student needs.

Two of the five themes that emerged when answering the first research question focused on the idea of a teacher demonstrating care by being flexible in accommodating student needs. These two themes—caring teachers honor student interests and perspectives and caring teachers provide assistance when students struggle to understand course content—required flexibility from the teacher. Participants referred to ideas of teacher flexibility numerous times
when describing their most caring teachers, while participants referred to ideas of rigidity when discussing their least caring teachers.

Bartell (2011) suggested that one of the beneficial outcomes for students who are in classes with caring teachers is improved student achievement. Furthermore, Goldstein (1999) argued that caring relationships play a key role in students’ intellectual growth and development. While this study did not focus on correlating teacher care to student achievement, participant interviews provided insight on the importance of teacher care as it pertained to student perceptions of academic success in a particular classroom.

Although a majority of participants in this study were high-performing academically and experienced success in most of their classes, several participants indicated that they believed teacher care positively affected academic success. Participants explained that they worked harder on assignments, were more engaged with classroom activities, and earned better grades in the classrooms of their most caring teachers. Alternately, participants indicated that they generally did not try as hard on assignments, were less engaged with classroom activities, and earned worse grades in the classrooms of least caring teachers. While further research is needed to explore the claims made by Bartell and Goldstein, this research suggests that participants perceive teacher care as positively affecting academic success.

Two important ideas that developed from this research were not known prior to the completion of this dissertation. The first idea that emerged in this dissertation that is not found elsewhere in the ethic of care research is in regard to the five themes that developed as the first research question was answered. The findings of the first research question resulted in five activities that are found in the classrooms of the most caring teachers. These five themes are as follows: 1) Providing descriptive feedback on student work; 2) Responding when students do not
understand what was taught; 3) Engaging students in conversations about post-high school ambitions; 4) Displaying a positive and optimistic attitude; and 5) Honoring student interests and perspectives.

The theory that when a teacher engages in these five activities he or she is able to demonstrate care for all students—as opposed to some students—is a key takeaway from this research. This claim informs the ethic of care in two ways. First, this is the first time that these five unique themes have emerged together in research. Researchers such as Gilligan, Noddings, and Tronto have explored the ethic of care, but this research stands alone in pairing all five themes together. Second, this is the first time that differentiation between students’ most caring teachers, least caring teachers, and polarizing teachers has been explored. Other studies (e.g., Owens & Ennis, 2005) have explored why some teachers demonstrate care and other teachers do not demonstrate care, but the concept of a polarizing teacher is unique to this research.

Another concept that is unique about this dissertation is the utilization of recent high school graduates as the participants for this study. The idea of exploring student perceptions was one other important factor that developed during this research. While student perceptions could provide valuable insight for teachers (e.g., Aldridge, Fraser, & Ntuli, 2009; Konings, Brand-Gruwel, & van Merrienboer, 2010) current research lacks a focus on student perceptions (e.g., Hubbard, 2001; Good & Weinstein, 1986).

The use of student perceptions to generate feedback on teacher care is not completely unique. Pianta, Hamre, Allen, and colleagues (2006, 2012, 2013) have completed a number of studies examining student perceptions. What sets this study apart is twofold. First, those studies used classroom observations in addition to student interviews. Second, those studies cited interviews of current students as opposed to recent high school graduates. While both
approaches provide noteworthy findings in the area of teacher care, this study remains unique compared to other studies focused on perceptions of teacher care.

In terms of the effect of using interviews of recent high school graduates to characterize teacher care, the approach was beneficial. Participants in this study indicated that they believed having a chance to share their stories could help provide feedback to teachers on student care. Participants indicated that student perceptions could be helpful for both caring and non-caring teachers. Participants believed that when caring teachers heard feedback from current and former students about their high levels of caring, teachers would gain confidence in their teaching abilities as a result of hearing the positive feedback. Alternately, participants believed that when non-caring teachers received feedback from current and former students about their low levels of caring, teachers would use the feedback constructively for the purpose of improving their approach to caring.

Several individuals discussed their appreciation and appeared to enjoy the opportunity to share stories about their most caring teachers. Participants indicated that they wished their teachers could be given the positive feedback they were providing during the interview. During a handful of discussions, participants indicated that they were going to reach out to their former most caring teachers either to reconnect with them or to thank them for making an impact on their life.

Alternately, several participants explained their frustration when talking about their least caring teachers. A number of participants indicated that they had wished that school administration had asked them their perceptions of care that teachers had demonstrated. Participants indicated that all students had a good idea of which teachers demonstrated care and which teachers did not demonstrate care. Yet, according to participants, teacher performance did
not change over several years for the teachers who were identified as non-caring. Participants explained that they believed that performance in regard to teacher care had not changed because participants indicated that older and younger friends and siblings reported similar perceptions of the same non-caring teachers. Finally, participants indicated they wished they had been given the opportunity to provide feedback on student care during their high school years so that teachers who were not demonstrating care to students could be helped.

**Discussion of the Research Questions**

In addition to findings that aligned with the theoretical framework of this study, findings that emerged as a result of answering the two research questions also provided important information that informs the literature on teacher care. The two research questions that guided the work of this dissertation are as follows:

1. How do recent high school graduates characterize the phenomenon of teacher care (as individuals and in general) as they reflect upon their high school experiences?

2. How do features of Noddings’ ethic of care theory compare to the elements of teacher care as described by recent high school graduates?

In the following sections, results are interpreted in light of research questions and discussed in conjunction with other literature. Results and discussion of the first research question are provided below. Results and discussion of the second research question are provided in the following section.

**Research question 1: The phenomenon of teacher care.**

The first research question was addressed by asking participants to characterize two of their most caring high school teachers, as well as two of their least caring high school teachers.
By asking participants to describe their most caring and least caring teachers, characteristics at both ends of the spectrum in terms of teacher care were provided.

In response to the first research question, participants discussed various teacher approaches to providing feedback on student work when asked to discuss teacher care. Participants explained that their most caring teachers provided descriptive feedback on student work including assignments, projects, and assessments. Participants indicated that their most caring teachers demonstrated ideas of reciprocation—where teachers provided feedback to student work.

This idea of reciprocation is found many places in the literature involving teacher care. Noddings (1984) referred to reciprocation when she suggested that both the student and the teacher contribute to the formation of a caring relationship (Noddings, 1984). Gomez et al. (2004) and Mueller & Perret-Clermont (1999) referred to the idea of the relationship between student and teacher being a reciprocal exchange between both individuals. Hattie (2007) also recommended that teachers reciprocate student work with feedback, suggesting teacher feedback is one of the most “powerful influences on student achievement” (p. 81).

Beyond the idea of reciprocation, elements of confirmation also occurred regularly as students discussed teacher feedback. Not only was confirmation identified as an activity of a caring teacher (Noddings, 1984), confirmation was also identified by Siccardi and Iseminger (2008) as teachers providing constructive feedback and positive comments when the student is doing something well. Participants referred to features of confirmation when describing the positive descriptive feedback they received from their most caring teachers. This idea that reciprocation (e.g., Gomez et al., 2004) and confirmation (e.g., Noddings, 1984) closely relate to
one-another was a key takeaway when comparing participant dialogue and existing research on teacher care.

When asked to characterize teacher care, a number of participants discussed the various ways teachers responded when students struggled to understand course content. Throughout the interviews, participants recalled that their most caring teachers took time to reteach content and answer questions when students did not understand the information. The noticeable participant focus on teacher assistance in this study echoes literature outlining the expectation that teachers provide assistance to students who are struggling to understand course content as well as the importance of teachers being willing to reteach if students do not understand material the first time it was taught (Bartell, 2011).

Another theme that emerged was the idea that caring teachers engage students in conversations about post-high school plans. The conversations about post-high school ambitions participants described resembled the concept of dialogue—one of four activities that caring teachers utilize to demonstrate care to their students (Noddings, 1984). Dialogue consists of a teacher talking, listening, and sharing with students, as well as a teacher sharing their history with students (Diekelmann, 1990). Some participants indicated that their most caring teachers referred to their own college experiences when providing students with advice about what college to attend or selecting an area of study. Participants suggested that teachers who referenced their own college experiences helped students feel more connected to those teachers and made their advice more credible.

Participants who indicated that their most caring teachers used a positive and optimistic attitude described teacher attributes that were similar to the attributes that Noddings outlined in her ethic of care research. Noddings (2005) suggested that teachers who operate through an ethic
of care promote a classroom of nurturing, care giving, and encouragement. Also, similar to participants’ comments that their most caring teachers appear to be excited about interacting with students, Noddings stressed that teachers who use an ethic of care emphasize interpersonal relationships and strive to facilitate a sense of belonging.

To help provide context to the concept of teachers remaining positive when students are not meeting classroom expectations, it is helpful to recall the research around commitment. Commitment in terms of teacher care refers to the teacher remaining committed to a relationship with a student even when the student is going through difficult times (Hamington & Sander-Staudt, 2011). Additionally, commitment involves the teacher seeking to understand the student and accepting each student’s feelings. The concept of commitment indicates that teachers who have a caring relationship with students support students at all times—regardless if the students meet or do not meet teacher expectations. A teacher who practices commitment remains dedicated to students, meaning that the educator remains positive and optimistic even when teacher redirection occurs.

Research question 2: Comparing Noddings’ research to participant perceptions of care

The second research question was addressed by comparing dialogue from participant interviews with Noddings’ ethic of care research (Noddings, 1984). Participant dialogue referring to Noddings’ characteristics of care and activities of a caring teacher are detailed and explained in the following section, helping to the answer the question of how Noddings’ ethic of care theory compares to the elements of teacher care as described by today’s students.

The large amount of participant dialogue that aligned with Noddings’ work was a major takeaway of this research. It was significant how closely participant dialogue resembled the research that Noddings provided in regard to teacher care. When participants were asked
questions that directly addressed the activities of a caring teacher, participants almost always indicated that the activities were occurring in the classrooms of their most caring teachers. Furthermore, elements of each of the three characteristics of care emerged during almost every interview when participants described their most caring teachers.

In addition to a large number of references that resembled Noddings’ work, another major takeaway of this research was that the five themes that emerged when answering the first research question also closely aligned to Noddings’ ethic of care research. When participant dialogue was examined, it was intriguing to see how Noddings’ findings overlapped with participant perceptions of teacher care.

The idea of engrossment often appeared when participants discussed ideas related to the theme of Caring Teachers Honor Student Interests and Perspectives that emerged from answering the first research question. Both concepts suggest that a caring teacher is intentional in learning about individual student interests, and also understanding the different perspectives students bring to the classroom. The concept of engrossment is also similar to motivational shift, with the difference being that engrossment typically occurs early in the relationship while motivational shift occurs later in the relationship (Noddings, 1996).

The idea of commitment was discussed often as participants communicated the idea that Caring Teachers Display a Positive and Optimistic Attitude. Participants indicated that they believed their most caring teachers remained positive in their interactions with students when students were going through a rough time in their life. Examples of issues that participants indicated they went through during high school included family issues, relationship issues, and mental-health issues such as depression and anorexia. Students indicated that there was a
genuine appreciation for teachers who stayed committed to students when students weren’t performing or behaving at their best.

The idea of motivational shift was discoursed quite frequently when students discussed concepts connected to the theme of Caring Teachers Honor Student Interests and Perspectives. The theme of teachers honoring student interests and perspectives was referenced 76 times across all interviews, making it the most-discussed topic of conversation when students were asked to discuss teacher care. The high frequency at which participants articulated elements of motivational shift made this concept one of the most significant findings of this study.

Ideas about modeling often blended with ideas around the theme of Teachers Display an Positive and Optimistic Attitude. Participants indicated that the teachers who modeled care in their interactions were generally positive and optimistic people. When participants discussed teachers who were always positive and optimistic, they often provided examples of how those teachers were caring and warm in their interactions with all students.

The concept of dialogue in terms of teacher care came up numerous times as participants touched on ideas around the theme of Caring Teachers Engage Students in Conversations about Post-High School Ambitions. Participants indicated that their most caring teachers exchanged ideas, answered questions, and provided advice to students about both colleges and careers. Participants indicated that the dialogue they shared with teachers often helped the participants to make significant decisions in terms of which college to attend and which academic major to pursue.

When provided a definition of practice as it relates to teacher care, participants indicated collectively that 32 out of 40 of their most caring teachers provided opportunities to practice demonstrating care to other students. Participants described classrooms where collaboration and
sharing was encouraged by the teacher and was a part of the everyday routine. Participants discussed how they were given a chance to model care for other students through collaborative learning and group activities.

Although participants identified practice as an activity that 32 out of the 40 most caring teachers demonstrated, this concept was the least discussed aspect Noddings’ research. When participants discussed opportunities to practice care, participants only discussed assignments and projects that were completed with other students. Other examples of practice of care, such as mentoring younger students or completing community service projects, were not mentioned during interviews.

Even when discussing collaborative work—which is identified by Noddings as an activity facilitated by a caring teacher—some participants were unsure if they were truly practicing care. While a number of other participant comments resembled Noddings’ research on the practice of care, the concept of students having the opportunity to practice care was not as prevalent in the classroom compared to other features of Noddings’ work. These findings suggest that further research in the area of students practicing care is warranted. More specifically, the methods teachers use to facilitate collaborative groups as well as options for high school students to practice care outside of collaborative learning should be investigated.

Ideas similar to confirmation were discussed as participants described the theme of *Caring Teachers Provide Descriptive Feedback on Student Work*. Participants explained that their most caring teachers used descriptive feedback to tell students what they needed to do to complete work at a high level, as well as how students could attain their goals. Participants also indicated that their most caring teachers provided effective constructive criticism, which helped motivate students when their effort level was low on an assignment or project.
Information presented in this section compared Noddings’ ethic of care theory to the elements of teacher care that were described by recent high school graduates. When participants were provided with descriptions of Noddings’ elements of care, they indicated that all of Noddings’ features of care existed in the rooms of participants’ most caring teachers. Furthermore, similar concepts appeared when Noddings’ work was compared to the five themes that emerged as the first research question was answered.

Implications for Practice

This study indicates that the high school teachers of the 20 participants who were interviewed used different methods to demonstrate care for participants. These different approaches used by teachers resulted in students feeling mixed amounts of care from their high school teachers. The 20 recent high school graduates who participated in this study revealed that there were some teachers who did an outstanding job demonstrating care for students which results in all students feeling cared-for by the teacher. The participants also revealed that there were some teachers who demonstrated care in such a way that some students felt care from the teacher while other students did not feel care from the same teacher. Finally, the participants revealed there are some teachers who do a poor job of demonstrating care for students, resulting in all students feeling very little care from the teacher.

A goal for any school should be that all students feel cared-for by all of the teachers in the building. Unfortunately, all of the individuals who participated in this study indicated that their high schools did not meet the parameters of this goal. All 20 participants indicated that there was at least one teacher in their high school that did not demonstrate care for students. Furthermore, all but two of the participants indicated that there were multiple teachers in their high school who did not demonstrate care for students. Providing guidance for teachers on how
to demonstrate care for all students, as well as providing guidance for administrators on how to create a school where all teachers demonstrate care for all students, is the goal for the Implications for Practice section.

The 20 individuals who participated in this study provided valuable information for educators for how to promote a culture of care in the classroom. The participants identified five specific action steps that a teacher can utilize in the classroom to ensure that students feel cared-for by the teacher. Not only did the participants provide compelling evidence for why using the five strategies promotes care between student and teacher, when their dialogue was compared with leading research in the field of teacher care, participant perceptions closely resembled and supported the findings from those major studies. The tight alignment between participant dialogue and literature in the field of teacher care speaks to the validity of the participant feedback and the strategies they identified for promoting teacher care.

Based upon the advice and responses from the participants in this study, as well as the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2, the following section proposes a comprehensive action plan for teachers who recognize the need to promote an ethic of care within their classrooms, as well as for administrators who understand the importance of all students feeling cared-for by their high school teachers.

**Implications for teachers: Improving student care in the classroom**

The participants in this research study revealed that there are specific actions that the most caring teachers utilize for students to feel cared-for in the classroom. Participants collectively identified five themes that are regularly demonstrated by the most caring high school teachers. The themes that emerged in participant interviews are strategies that teachers can implement in their classroom. The data collected in this study combined with other research
addressing teacher care suggests that when these five strategies are implemented with fidelity, the teacher should be able to interact with students in a way such that students feel care. All five of the approaches will be discussed in the following paragraphs, along with practical steps that teachers can take to implement the strategies effectively.

**Provide descriptive feedback on student work.** The first recommended strategy for teachers to build a culture of care in their classroom is to provide students with descriptive feedback. The participants in this research study indicated that their most caring teachers take the time to respond and comment on student work. The participants acknowledged that it might be difficult for teachers who have large classes and significant numbers of students to provide large amounts of descriptive feedback. However, an analysis of the interview dialogue indicated that there was no connection between the number of students a teacher serves and the teacher’s ability to provide students with descriptive feedback.

Teachers should attempt a variety of methods for providing students with meaningful feedback. By attempting different methods, teachers can determine which approach is most impactful while also considering the time commitment needed to provide feedback. Participants identified a number of examples for how their most caring teachers provided feedback. Examples included feedback that is hand-written directly onto student work, feedback that is delivered to students electronically through programs such as Google Classroom, feedback that is provided verbally during individual teacher-student conferences, and feedback that is given in small-group settings. There is no perfect medium for providing students with feedback, so teachers will want to explore different options to determine which option is most efficient for their classroom.
An important aspect of descriptive feedback for teachers to remember is that students believe that classwork and teacher feedback are reciprocal. The recent high school graduates expressed that the assignments that are most laborious should receive the greatest amount of feedback from the teacher. Whereas short homework assignments might not require extensive feedback, more-intensive projects that should be met with descriptive feedback for the students on how the student is doing on the project and what still needs to be done for the student to demonstrate mastery.

Finally, teachers should not forget to provide students with positive feedback when they are completing a classroom task at a high level. The literature from Chapter 2 supported the idea of teachers providing students with positive feedback in order to build students’ confidence in a content area (Siccardi & Iseminger, 2008). Participants from this research study also shared that they appreciated specific positive feedback from their teacher and that this was an easy way for teachers to demonstrate care for their students.

**Provide assistance when students struggle to understand course content.** Providing assistance when students struggle to understand what was taught is the second recommended strategy for teachers to develop a culture of care in their classroom. While this may seem like a reasonable expectation of a teacher, participants indicated that disregarding students who were struggling with course content was the most common misstep teachers made in terms of their approach to student care.

The first step to providing assistance to students when they are struggling to understand information is recognizing when students are struggling. Teachers cannot rely on all students to indicate to the teacher when they do not understand a concept. As several of the participants in this study explained, often there are times when students are too embarrassed or afraid to ask a
question or admit their struggles. Therefore, it is up to the teacher to implement methods for identifying what students know and revealing if students do not understand a concept. In schools, these practices are referred to as formative assessments, and involve teachers evaluating student work during the course of learning before the student takes an assessment at the end of the unit. By evaluating individual student work throughout the course of learning, teachers are able to provide assistance and help students before the end of the unit or prior to the summative assessment.

Once the teacher determines who in the class is struggling to understand course content, it is imperative that the teacher finds time to provide students with assistance. Several times, students discussed how their most caring teachers found the time to help students. The most common time when teachers should provide assistance to students in during the class period. Teachers should resist the temptation to move forward with new content when students, especially a large percentage of students, are struggling to understand course content. Outside the class period is another time when teachers must find time to help students. Participants in this study indicated that their most caring teachers were accessible to students for the purpose of providing help and answering questions. Examples of times when teachers could be available for help include before school, after school, during the lunch hour, and during a planning period. Furthermore, clearly communicating with students the periods of time the teacher is available for help is another step a teacher can take to demonstrate care to students. Caring teachers can provide this information on the front board in the classroom, on a class website, or through social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook.

Finally, when teachers provide assistance to students who struggle with course content, this strategy for promoting care will also result in favorable student outcomes later in the course.
By providing a student with help, the student’s level of confidence will grow and he or she will find greater motivation to complete future assignments for the teacher. Noddings (1992) found that teachers who provide assistance when students struggle enhances the student’s motivation by peaking the students’ interest in a subject and promoting instigative behaviors from the student. Participants in this study also indicated that students worked harder for teachers who took time to provide students with support on assignments.

**Engage students in conversation about post-high school ambitions.** Talking with students about their post-high school ambitions is a quick, easy step for teachers to demonstrate care to their students, yet many teachers do not implement this strategy in their classrooms. This strategy is one of the simplest steps for teachers to utilize because, unlike the other four strategies, this strategy can be completed after only one or two conversations with students. While some teachers may want to follow up and have continuous dialogue with students about their ambitions, the participants of this study indicated that this strategy is helpful immediately following the first interaction.

There are different approaches that teachers can use to engage students in conversations about post-high school ambitions. One common way is for teachers to find ways to utilize classroom assignments to get students talking about and exploring post-secondary school options or possible careers of interest. Student interest inventories, journaling assignments, course projects tied to careers, and discussions about local colleges were all classroom assignments or activities that participants mentioned that their most caring high school teachers used in the classroom.
Other participants suggested interactions about future plans were held separately from the classroom curriculum and were simply an individual conversation between teacher and student. Students indicated that these conversations were typically teacher-initiated, with the teacher expressing interest in learning about a student’s future goals and aspirations. It should be noted that for individual conversations about post-high school ambitions to occur between teacher and student, participants indicated that a strong relationship must first be present. In this study, there were 12 participants who reported having a conversation with a teacher about their post-high school ambitions. All 12 of the participants indicated they had a strong relationship with the teacher prior to having the conversation. Research also supports this idea, as Noddings (1992) suggested that the teacher must first get to know the student prior to truly understanding and supporting the goals of the student.

Finally, the impact that these conversations have on the students should not be underestimated. Eleven participants of the 12 participants who discussed this strategy explained that conversations with a high school teacher about post-high school ambitions played a significant role in the student’s selection of which college to attend or the student’s selection of an academic major.

**Display a positive and optimistic attitude.** The next recommended strategy for teachers to build a culture of care in their classroom is to display a positive and optimistic attitude. Teachers who utilize a positive and optimistic attitude when interacting with students are able to quickly and effectively build a classroom that is focused on the ethic of care as well as create a classroom culture that focuses on nurturing, care giving, and encouragement (Noddings, 2005).

The participants in this research study made it very apparent through their passionate and animated stories that teacher attitude is vitally important for a teacher who would like to promote
an ethic of care in his or her classroom. Teacher attitude was often one of the first things that a participant noticed about their teacher. Participants indicated that teacher behavior was one of the quickest ways for a teacher to either earn praise or generate reservations from students in regard to the capacity a teacher has for caring for students.

There are several examples of steps that teachers can take to demonstrate a positive and optimistic attitude toward students. First, it is important that teachers greet students with a smile and call the student by name when possible. When students enter the room, the teacher should be intentional about welcoming students, asking them about their day, and engaging in conversations when the students are so inclined. Throughout the class period, teachers should encourage interaction by asking the students questions, acknowledging student responses, and showing genuine interest in students’ thoughts and ideas.

The idea of remaining optimistic is another important piece of this strategy for promoting care. Optimism in this research is defined as a teacher who remains hopeful and enthusiastic when working with a student, regardless of the student meeting or not meeting classroom expectations. When students are meeting classroom expectations, the teacher should provide positive feedback and as a means of providing positive reinforcement to students for meeting expectations. When students are not meeting classroom expectations, the teacher should address the situation but do so in a way where the teacher is still treating the students with respect and dignity. When a student is not meeting expectations, teachers should redirect the student, set clear expectations for what he or she needs to do to meet classroom expectations, and then assume that the student will meet the expectations moving forward.
**Honor student interests and perspectives.** The last strategy that teachers should implement in their classrooms to develop a culture of care is to honor student interests and perspectives. Participants in this research study indicated that their most caring teachers were intentional in learning about individual student interests, and also understanding the different perspectives students bring to the classroom.

Teachers must be intentional in learning about students by asking them about their interests. By asking students about the hobbies and activities that students enjoy, as well as engaging students in conversations about the passions and things that matter to students, teachers can begin to look for ways to weave student interests into course curriculum and assignments. By implementing students’ interests into class assignments, teachers not only demonstrate care to students, but increase the likelihood of a student completing an assignment at a high level (Dweck, 1986).

Teachers should also be intentional about listening to student experiences and learning about student perspectives. When a teacher asks a student to share his or her stories, experiences, and feelings, the student feels empathy. However, simply asking students to share their perspectives is only the first step of this process. Once the teacher understands the perspectives of the student, the teacher must respond by making classroom decisions based on those experiences. An example of how a teacher honors student perspectives is when the teacher alters expectations for a homework assignment when students indicate that they have large amounts of homework in other classes or have a busy nighttime schedule. Another example is when a teacher makes special accommodations on assignments for a student who is dealing with a family emergency.
A key concept that emerged during the study was the idea of motivational shift. For teachers to honor student interests and perspectives, teachers much shift their attention from their own needs to meeting the individual needs of the students in the classroom (Noddings, 1984). Quite often for high school teachers, this shift occurs when teachers shift their attention from getting through course material to focusing on the needs of the students in the classroom. While it is common for high school teachers to feel pressure to push through large amounts of curriculum in short periods of time (Marzano, 2003), this strategy means that teachers need to shift their focus from getting through all of the curriculum and instead focus on whether or not the students are understanding the curriculum.

A goal for any high school should be that all students feel cared-for by all of the teachers in the building. While the thought of creating a high school environment where every student feels cared-for by every teacher may seem ambitious, the process begins within individual classrooms. As long as each teacher focuses on their individual classroom and creates a culture in their classroom where every student feels care, this goal is realistic. The recommendation from this research is for teachers to implement these five strategies of teacher care into their classrooms. When teachers implement these five strategies of teacher care in their classroom with fidelity, the end results should be a classroom where every student feels care from the teacher.

**Implications for administrators: Improving student care in schools**

With the large amount of research linking teacher care to student achievement (e.g., Bartell, 2011; Hackenberg, 2010; Noddings, 1992), a goal for any high school should be that all students feel cared-for by all of the teachers in the building. The previous section outlined the steps that teachers can take in order to build caring relationships in their classrooms. However,
the implications of this study goes beyond the work of the teacher in the classroom. School administrators must also contribute to improving student care in schools through their school leadership. In the following section, four specific areas of leadership are explored and provide advice for school administrators to ensure that all teachers build an ethic of care in their classroom.

**Professional development.** Although teacher care might seem like a traditional professional development topic, research suggests school administrators do not usually give this topic much attention when prioritizing professional development. Not only do administrators usually assume that teachers naturally know how to care for students (Owens & Ennis, 2005) administrators also usually assume that that topics of teacher care are taught to teachers during their teacher education courses (Beyer, 1997).

Professional development should focus on the five strategies for teacher care explained in the previous section. Before providing teachers with the five strategies, professional development leaders should ask teachers to answer questions two, three, five, and six from the interview protocol. These questions will ask teachers to characterize their most caring and least caring teachers. Next, professional development leaders should find a way to collect participant responses to those questions. Once the data has been collected, themes from the responses should be shared with the large group. Many of the themes found in this research should be the same themes that emerge from the teacher discussions.

Once the staff has had a chance to discuss their perceptions of the teacher care they experienced during their high school careers, focus of the professional development should move into the five strategies presented in this research. As the five strategies are being presented, definitions and examples of each strategy should be shared. Teachers should have the chance to
ask questions and have conversations about each of the strategies. Teachers should be encouraged to share stories from their own classrooms that connect to the strategies that are shared.

An alternate option that some schools may want to pursue is to have a student panel discuss teacher care in front of the staff. Student voices can be very powerful and send a message to staff if done correctly. Students could be asked to share their perceptions of teacher care, citing examples and stories. It will be important to ensure that if students are consulted to make sure that the stories that are shared are positive in nature and would not reflect poorly on a staff member in the audience. Once the student panel is complete, it will be important to connect their discussion back to the five strategies for promoting teacher care discussed in this study.

Expectations. Once professional development training has been delivered to the staff, school administrators and staff should begin to develop building-wide expectations in regard to improving levels of teacher care. There are two different options for developing building expectations for teacher care. For the first option, administration can work with the faculty to come up with one baseline expectation for teacher care. This baseline expectation would be a belief or a “core value” that all staff would be expected to follow. A very simple yet effective expectation could be the following: “All staff members will build caring relationships with students.” Once the staff agrees upon a baseline expectation for teacher care, it is recommended that the statement be placed on a school improvement plan or another document that guides the work of the building. For this first option, only one baseline expectation for teacher care is provided. This one baseline expectation should be placed together with any other core values that the building has previously developed.
Another option that administrators could pursue would be to implement more rigid expectations for teacher care. Administration could work with teachers to come up with expectations centered on all five of the teacher care strategies listed in this research. For example, one of the five expectations that staff could create is that “All staff will approach each day with a positive and optimistic attitude.” Once agreement is reached regarding one of the teacher care strategies, staff should move on to the next strategy. Staff would then come up with expectations supporting the other four strategies for teacher care. As was the case with the first options, once the staff agrees upon their expectations for teacher care, it is recommended that the expectations be placed on a school improvement plan or another document that guides the work of the building.

After the one baseline expectation (option one) or the staff expectations for teacher care (option two) have been developed and clearly communicated to the staff, administrators should commit to holding staff accountable to the expectations. If a staff member develops a pattern of not following the agreed-upon expectations outlined for teacher care, it is important that the administrator addresses these deficiencies with the teacher.

**Student feedback.** To monitor the effect the professional development plan has on teacher care, students should be allowed to provide feedback on interactions they experience with individual teachers. Not only did participants indicate that they would appreciate having the chance to provide feedback on teacher care, research also suggests the importance of allowing students to provide feedback (Aldridge et al., 2009; Good & Weinstein, 1986).

It is the recommendation of this study that administrators look for ways to generate student feedback as it pertains to teacher care. Some schools may already have surveys, such as school climate surveys, which currently collect this data. If schools have implemented climate
surveys, administrators will want to look at those surveys to see how the questions align with school expectations for teacher care. Schools that use a climate survey that does not address the topic of teacher care may want to look at revising the survey or use an alternative survey. Schools that do not use a school climate survey will want to look at creating their own survey with questions that align with school expectations for teacher care.

Upon completion of a student survey, schools will need to determine how results are shared with teachers and who is allowed to see the results. One option would be for the results to go directly from the student to the teacher. If the teacher is the only individual to see the student feedback, the teacher could be expected to use feedback for personal reflection. A teacher could set goals for teacher care around the student feedback he or she receives, and determine individual areas for improvement.

Another option is for other school personnel in addition to the teachers, such as instructional coaches or school administrators, to have access to the survey data. In some school districts, the teachers’ union may be apprehensive about using student feedback as a part of the evaluative process. In school districts where the teachers’ union is apprehensive about administrators and evaluators having access to student survey data, it would be recommended that the student feedback is given only to instructional coaches. Instructional coaches could meet individually with teachers and examine results as a part of the coaching process. Teachers and instructional coaches could work together to create goals around interactions, and meet regularly to determine progress in meeting those goals.

Alternately, if a school district is comfortable with student feedback being a part of the evaluative process, it is recommended that student survey feedback be given to building administration. Initial feedback could be shared with teachers for the purpose of having the
teacher set goals in the area of student interactions. Meetings during the year could be used to update goals and examine new survey data. More intensive actions, such as memos of awareness of formal plans of assistance, may need to be put into place for teachers who demonstrate trends of scoring poorly on the student feedback addressing teacher care.

**Other possible action steps.** For professional development to be implemented at a high level, it is important that school administrators find methods for monitoring and re-teaching concepts of teacher care. It is important that the five strategies for improving teacher care and other elements of teacher care are re-visited on a regular basis. Below is a list of additional action steps that administrators can implement to promote an ethic of care in their buildings:

- Encourage teachers to use their Individual Professional Development Plan (IPDP) to set a goal in the area of teacher care. To create an objective that will be most helpful, it is suggested that teachers come up with a goals around teacher care that can be easily measured and monitored.

- School administration can generate a set of best practice “look-fors” in regard to teacher care. Examples of these look-fors could include teacher engagement with students, positive teacher-student interactions, and teacher use of formative assessment to gauge student understanding. When administrators complete classroom walkthroughs, they can focus on looking for these best practices. Once building-wide data is gathered, the results can be shared with staff for feedback and goal setting.

- Complete exit interviews of each high school graduate. Questions exploring student perceptions of teacher care could be completed. A school counselor or school administrator could complete exit interviews, and data over time should be collected and analyzed.
• Implement regular focus groups where selected students discuss teacher care in the building. It is recommended that students discuss interactions in general without using specific teacher names. School counselors could run focus groups, and findings should be communicated with school staff or building leadership.

• Develop systems within each building to keep track of patterns of teacher care issues for individual teachers. One example includes keeping track of data on those students who drop a class because of care-related issues. Keeping a database of students drop a class due to teacher-care could provide powerful feedback for those teachers who have a high number of students who drop their classes.

• Reinforce examples of positive care students feel when working with teachers. Supply students with cards or tokens to give to teachers when students experience an interaction that builds their confidence or is the “highlight” of their day. Additionally, administrators could give similar cards or tokens to teachers when they notice the teacher teachers demonstrating teacher care.

• In terms of hiring practices, administrators could develop opportunities to explore the levels of care that candidates demonstrate for students. Administrators could develop methods for determining if applicants meet district expectations for teacher care. Methods could include using care-based questions during interviews, asking candidates to complete personality tests, and using reference checks that focus on teacher-student interactions. Candidates who do not meet minimum expectations in terms of student care could be eliminated from the candidate pool.
School administrators play a key role in promoting teacher care in a building. If the goal of a high school is that all students feel cared-for by all of the teachers in the building, it is important that administration takes intentional steps to meet the goal. The recommendation from this research is that administration commits professional development time to teach the five strategies for teacher care presented in the previous section. Once training is provided, administrators should come up with a process for creating building-wide expectations around teacher care. Once expectations have been created, it is important to monitor that teacher care is occurring in every classroom. One way to monitor teacher care is by asking students to provide feedback on the care they receive in individual classrooms. Beyond these steps, there are several other steps that administrators could implement in order to meet the goal that all students feel cared-for by all teachers in the high school.

**Implications for teacher preparation programs, school boards, and parents**

This research also has implications for other groups of individuals. Teacher preparation programs should consider this research as they look for practical strategies for promoting teacher care that can be implemented into course curriculum. The approaches outlined in this dissertation could be implemented by aspiring teachers who are hoping to teach with an ethic of care in their future classrooms. School boards should consider this research as they examine current teaching practices in their district. As school boards help develop the core values they expect from their teaching staff, they should use this research to help create expectations around teacher care. Finally, parents should consider this research when they are determining the effectiveness of a teacher in regard to student care. Parents who read this study should have a fundamental understanding of the steps teachers should be taking to demonstrate care to their children.
Recommendations for Further Research

The findings from this qualitative case study suggest four areas for potential future research. The first section addresses needing to take a closer look at effective teacher feedback. The second section speaks to the need for further research in terms of teacher assistance for students who are struggling. The next section looks at Noddings’ idea of practicing care and the need to explore how that concept looks in high schools. The final section will address further ideas for teachers who are considered to be polarizing in terms of the care students feel from those teachers.

**Descriptive teacher feedback.** The first recommendation for further research is to take a closer look at effective descriptive teacher feedback in the high school classroom. Twelve of the participants in this study indicated that they appreciated receiving descriptive feedback on their schoolwork. While participants provided dialogue on how their most caring or least caring high school teachers used feedback in their classrooms, participants were not asked to provide further explanation or context about the feedback.

A qualitative study could be designed to take a closer at descriptive teacher feedback. More specifically, the 12 participants who discussed teacher feedback could take part in follow-up interviews where students are asked to provide in-depth dialogue about the feedback they received in their high school classes. Furthermore, visits to high school classrooms and an exploration of the teacher feedback as well as student perceptions of the feedback could further clarify the impact of teacher feedback and the connection to student perceptions of teacher care.

**Providing assistance to students who struggle.** The second recommendation for further research is to continue exploring teacher assistance for students who are struggling to understand course content. All but one of the participants discussed how different high school teachers
responded when it was determined that students were struggling with their coursework. While the participants indicated that they felt care from the teacher when they received assistance when they struggled with a concept, further research should explore how much teacher assistance is needed for the greatest outcomes in students learning. Similarly, the impact that teacher assistance has on low- versus high-performing students should be examined.

A qualitative or mixed-methods study focused on the impact of teachers providing assistance to struggling students is suggested. More specifically, the recommendation would be to select 20 additional participants who are currently high school students to take part in the research. The students who are selected should include a mix of students who are low performing and high performing from an academic standpoint. Given that all participants who participated in this dissertation currently attend college, it would be beneficial for another study to explore a cross-section of students in terms of academic accomplishment. Selecting some college-bound students, as well as other students who do not plan on attending college, could provide additional insight on teacher assistance.

Interviews with this variety of students should focus on asking questions about the teacher assistance the students received, as well as the perceived impact of the assistance. Along with interviews, classroom visits should be arranged to see what teacher assistance looks like in the classroom. Furthermore, an exploration looking at the correlation between teacher assistance and student achievement would provide valuable insight regarding the impact teacher assistance has on student outcomes.

**Providing opportunities for students to practice care.** The next recommendation for further research is to take a closer look at the idea of providing opportunities for students to practice care, which was one of Noddings’ activities of a caring teacher. The alignment between
Noddings’ research and the findings of this study was apparent. However, the one area where the connection was not as clear was when it came to practicing care. Many of the participants indicated that they had the chance to practice care, but almost all of the opportunities described by participants revolved around collaborative grouping. Digging further, while participants had many collaborative learning opportunities in their high school classes, they appeared to unsure about the effect that those opportunities had in terms of developing their ability to care for others.

A qualitative study that further explores the concept of practicing care is suggested. Observations of high school classrooms should focus primarily on the methods teachers use to allow students to practice care. Researchers should observe collaborative groups to determine if students are having the opportunity to practice care. Furthermore, researchers should look to see if any opportunities outside of collaborative learning settings are provided to students for the purpose of building skills associated with care. Once classroom observations are done, interviews with both students and teachers could explore both groups’ perceptions of opportunities to practice care, as well as the impact that those opportunities have on the caring relationships between teacher and student.

**Polarizing teachers.** The last recommendation for further research is to explore the idea of “polarizing” teachers. When participant dialogue was analyzed, it was determined that over one third of the teachers who were discussed in this research were identified by the participants as teachers who were viewed as caring by some students and uncaring by other students. This result was one of the most interesting findings of this study, but there are still numerous unanswered questions about the concept of teachers who display varying amounts of care for different students.
A qualitative study focused on the concept of teachers who draw mixed perceptions from students in terms of teacher care would be valuable. To explore this concept, the 15 participants who took part in this study who discussed a polarizing teacher could be contacted for follow-up interviews. Participants could be asked a number of questions to help clarify and further understand why these teachers earned mixed reputations in terms of care for students. Questions could also focus specifically on opinions of how those teachers interacted with other students.

One other step that would be valuable would be to conduct interviews with the teachers who were identified as a polarizing teacher in terms of the care they demonstrated towards students. While this could create some uneasy feelings for the students, teacher, and researcher, this data collected from these interviews could be impactful.

**Conclusion**

A number of participants in this study expressed their appreciation for having a chance to share their perceptions of the care they experienced from their high school teachers. The participants displayed great passion and enthusiasm during interviews where they shared stories about their most caring and least caring high school teachers. Participants spoke glowingly and with great admiration when they recalled teachers who demonstrated large amounts of care for students. The participants expressed that the care they felt from those teachers has had a major, positive impact on their lives. Alternately, participants spoke with a noticeable sense of bitterness and animosity when discussing the teachers who demonstrated little to no care for students. Participants indicated that the negative actions of those least caring teachers are still being felt months and even years later.

The purpose of this qualitative project was to describe the role that teacher care played in experiences of recent high school graduates. Both the research on teacher care as well as the
data collected from the interviews in this study indicates that teacher care plays a significant role in the development of high school students. While this study uncovered some inspiring stories from participants who spoke about the unwavering care teachers showed for students, there were equally as many stories shared by participants where teachers demonstrated little to no care for students.

The results of this study revealed five practical strategies that teachers can utilize in their classrooms to demonstrate care for their students. These strategies include providing descriptive feedback on student work, providing assistance when students struggle to understand course content, engaging students in conversations about post-high school ambitions, displaying a positive and optimistic attitude, and honoring student interests and perspectives. This study suggests when a teacher implements these practices into his or her instructional approaches and student interactions, there is an excellent chance that all students will feel care from the teacher.

**Final Reflection**

I wrote the introduction to this dissertation prior to exploring the ethic of care literature and completing participant interviews on the topic of teacher care. As I neared the completion of this dissertation, I felt compelled to revisit the introduction of this dissertation one last time. I was curious to see how my narrative explaining my difficulties demonstrating care for all students compared to the narratives participants provided regarding the teacher care during their interviews. As I compared my experiences of demonstrating care for students against the participants’ experiences of receiving care from teachers, I began to notice a pattern. Several of my personal teaching stories were nearly identical to the stories provided by participants during their interviews. Unfortunately, many of the participant stories that matched my own experiences were not mentioned when participants discussed their most caring teachers. Instead,
several of the shared experiences surfaced when participants discussed their least caring teachers.

For example, the idea that caring teachers provide descriptive feedback on student work was a topic that emerged both as I recalled my days as a beginning teacher and in the participant dialogue. Participants explained that their least caring teachers routinely failed to provide students with descriptive feedback. Upon reflection, I realized that at times I also failed to provide students with descriptive feedback. Rather than supply students with feedback on assessments and homework assignments, I didn’t see the importance of taking time to provide students with descriptive feedback. Instead, I recall being more concerned about the pace of my instruction and moving forward with new curriculum.

The second theme that developed in this research was that caring teachers provide assistance when students struggle to understand course content. Reading through my introduction and reflecting on my early approach to teaching revealed that I often decided against providing students with additional assistance—even when it was obvious they were struggling. Instead, I was of the mindset that if students did not understand the material after it had been taught the first time, student learning was no longer my responsibility. Rather, I believed that student learning was the responsibility of the student, and therefore if the student wanted to learn the material it was up to he or she to revisit the work.

Another similarity I noticed between the care I demonstrated for my students and the care participants received from teachers was regarding the notion that caring teachers engage students in conversations about post-high school ambitions. My recollection of my early years of teaching was that I often avoided engaging students in meaningful conversations. I had been warned that teachers should not become “friends” with students, and therefore I was leery about
having deep conversations with students. In fact, I don’t recall having a single significant discussion with a student about post-high school ambitions during my first year of teaching.

The fourth theme that surfaced in the interview dialogue was that caring teachers consistently display a positive and optimistic attitude. As I went back and read the introduction and reflected on my early years of teaching, I realized that I did not always demonstrate a positive attitude when working with students. While there were instances when I displayed a positive and cheerful attitude, there were plenty of other times when I allowed factors outside of work influence my attitude towards students. Furthermore, I vividly recall going into my first teaching job thinking that the “Don’t smile until Christmas” advice I was given during a teaching field experience was an approach that effective teachers used in their classes. Therefore, I believed I needed to utilize this approach—and did so in my classroom.

Finally, one last comparison between my perceptions of the care I demonstrated for my students and the perceptions of the care the participants experienced in high school was in regard to honoring student interests and perspectives. As I reflected on my teaching experiences I realized that I was much more concerned about my own needs rather than the needs of my students. For example, many of the discussions I had with my classes and with individual students were focused around my personal interests rather than trying to recognize the students’ interests and weave those ideas into our conversations. Furthermore, I recall shutting down and refusing to acknowledge student perspectives when students were attempting to explain why they did not complete the homework or why they arrived tardy to class.

As I reflected upon some of the decisions I made as a beginning teacher I felt embarrassment and regret for believing these were effective teaching strategies. When I think about the impact these decisions had on my students, I can understand why some students did not
feel cared-for in my classroom. However, I realize that what happened in the classroom was not entirely my fault because I was never taught there were more effective ways to demonstrate care for students. Looking back, it is frustrating that I was never provided with training or given the tools that were necessary to promote an ethic of care for all students in my classroom.

This study holds significance for teachers who recognize the need to promote an ethic of care within their classrooms, as well as high school administrators who are looking to advocate the ethic of care in their buildings. My hope is that teachers who read this research realize it is possible to have a classroom where all students feel cared-for. Likewise, my hope is that administrators who read this research realize it is possible to have a building where all students feel cared-for. My fear is that if educators are never provided with strategies for demonstrating care for all students then interactions—like the one I described between Carter from my 6th period geometry class and myself—will continue to occur.
APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT FLYER

Attention UNI Students!!

Student volunteers are needed to tell their high school stories! Information collected will be used for a dissertation project for the Iowa State University PhD program.

Who: Any individual ages 18-22 (at the time of interview)

What: Students are asked to volunteer to take part in a 60-90 minute interview.

Where: Interviews will take place at the UNI Library

When: During the month of May/June

Why: Your feedback about the relationships you formed and the teacher care you experienced from your high school teachers will help train high school teachers how to best work with students in order to produce improved outcomes for students.

Text or Call if interested! - Jared Smith Principal Researcher

**All volunteers will receive a free Scratch Cupcake!**
APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Student Perceptions of Teacher Care:
Experiences and Voices of Recent High School Graduates
Dissertation Project

Title of Study: Student Perceptions of Teacher Care: Experiences and Voices of Recent High School Graduates

Investigators: Jared Smith, doctoral candidate at Iowa State University

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part – your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with myself or my Dissertation Chair before deciding to participate – our contact info has been listed below.

Introduction
The purpose of this project is to understand the role that teacher care played in the classroom experience of recent high school graduates. This study brings to life the experiences of recent high school graduates as they reflect on their high school experience, focusing on the care participants received from individual teachers. To better understand teacher care from the perspective of the student, interviews will be set up with volunteers who recently graduated high school. Only those individuals who are between the ages of 18 and 22 at the time of the interview will be allowed to participate. The stories and insight you give during our conversation will be summarized and interpreted for the purpose of educating teachers about the importance of teacher care, as well as the development of strategies for improving student care.

Description of Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview that will investigate the importance of teacher care for students. The interview will include a ten minute introduction where the study is explained, followed by a series of questions that will ask you to describe your perceptions of teacher care. Total interview time will last between one and two hours. If necessary, a follow up interview may be conducted.

Risks or Discomforts
You will be asked to give your perceptions of the care you received from individual teachers during your high school career. Since you have already graduated from high school, many of the risks or discomforts associated with talking poorly or negatively about past teachers have been minimized.

However, there is still a small chance that you may experience risks or discomforts from participating in this study. Potential risks could include embarrassment or uneasiness when talking negatively about former teachers. You could feel that potential relationships with former teachers could be strained due to honest answers. Additionally, you may feel uncomfortable discussing negative situations you have shared with individual teachers. Because of these risks, participation in this research project is voluntary. You can decline to answer any questions at any
time. Additionally, if you wish to remove yourself from the project you may do so during the five week period after you received the interview transcript. This process will be described at greater length below in the Confidentiality section.

Benefits
If you decide to participate in this study, there will be no direct benefit to you. However, it is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit teachers and educational leaders by supplying guidance on how to better develop quality relationships with students. When educators receive professional development on how to effectively care for students, the hope is that the effectiveness of the teacher will improve.

Costs and Compensation
You will not have any costs from participating in this study other than the time you spend during the interview and reviewing the interview transcript. You will be compensated for participating in this study with a cupcake.

Participant Rights
Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time during the five week period after you have received your interview transcript, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences.

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

Confidentiality
Records identifying participants will be kept as confidential as possible and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

A number of steps will be taken to protect your confidentiality. These steps are listed below. However, it is important that you understand there are some limitations as to my ability to completely protect your confidentiality during this process:

- Your real name will be replaced with a fake name in all of the data (transcripts of our interview). Specific descriptors which would allow the audience to determine the participant being described will not be given. Examples of these specific participant descriptors not given in the final product include specific high school accomplishments, specific classes you took, and very specific physical characteristics. At no time will the name of the school you attended be mentioned in the final product.
- You will be asked not to share names of the teachers you are describing in your interview. Specific teacher descriptors which would allow the audience to determine who is being described will not be given. Examples of these specific teacher descriptors not included in the final work include specific teaching accomplishments, exact number
of years of teaching, and very specific physical characteristics. At no time will the name of the school the teacher works at be mentioned in the final product.

- In order to alleviate any concerns this may cause, I want to remind you that I have worked in education and with students for over twelve years and I am very familiar with the school setting and characteristics of students and teachers. At no time will descriptions of you or your former teachers be used that would allow the audience to determine who is being described. My background and knowledge of students and teachers will allow me to use solid judgment when determining which descriptors can be used to describe participants and teachers with minimal chance of being identified.

- Interviews will be collected on a password protected laptop computer. A talk-to-text program called Google Voice Typing will be used to collect interview transcripts. Following the interview, the transcript will be immediately uploaded a website called Cybox. Once uploaded and saved to the Cybox website, the original transcript will be deleted. The next step will be for me to will be to access the transcript and replace all participant names with fake names. Once this has been done, a link to the transcript will be emailed directly to you. If there is a portion of the interview you no longer want included in a final product (such as the dissertation or other presentations), you may contact me by email within three weeks of receiving interview transcript to let me know which parts you would like changed or deleted. Those pieces of transcript data will be deleted. If I do not hear from you in three weeks, I will send you another reminder email asking you for any changes you would like to make. If I do not hear from you within two weeks of this second follow-up email it will be assumed any contents of this transcript may be used in my research. **If there is a time during the five week period after you receive the interview transcript that you feel uncomfortable about a piece of the writing in which you are included, please make sure to let me know and I will omit that piece of information from the study.**

- Interviews will occur at the University of Northern Iowa Library. All interviews will take place private study rooms with doors to ensure that conversations are not heard and that the interview remains confidential. The likelihood that someone passing by would be able to determine who you are talking about is very low. It should be noted that all study rooms where the interviews will take place do have windows. By having windows this will allow both of us to remain partially visible to others. This will help to ensure that you feel comfortable during the interview.

Again, it is important to keep in mind there is a chance that people who are very familiar with the school setting may be able to figure out who is being described in the study.

Questions
You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study, contact:

Jared Smith (Principal Investigator): Cell: 319-464-1329/Email: jasmit82@iastate.edu
Joanne Marshall (Dissertation Chair): Phone: 515-294-9995/Email: jmars@iastate.edu
Consent and Authorization Provisions
Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. Before the interview begins, you must turn in this completed Informed Consent Document. Only after this form is read over, understood, and signed will the interview begin.

Participant’s Name (printed) ____________________________________________

__________________________________________  ________________
Participant’s Signature                  Date
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Hello (name). Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. I know you have a busy schedule and I really appreciate your willingness to take part in this project.

Today I hope to hear your perceptions about the care you received from individual teachers during your high school career.

One important request that I have during this interview is that you refrain from using any teacher names. There are many reasons for me asking you to not use teacher names. The main reason being that I would not want you to feel regret or guilty for speaking poorly about previous teachers.

Do you understand the expectation that you will not use teacher names during this interview?

For ease of note taking and not slowing down the interview, I am going to use a talk-to-text program called Google Voice Typing to record our conversation. If at any time you would prefer that we end our conversation, please let me know and we will do so immediately.

Do I have your permission to record our discussion?

Do you have any other questions before we begin?

Possible Introductory Questions

1. Do you have any big plans for summer?
2. Are you enjoying your experience at UNI? What is your major/minor/etc?
3. What are your plans after graduation?
The following questions will take up about one hour of time. I want you to give as much description and thought as you can to the following questions. Do you understand how this interview process will work? Do you have any other questions?

Interview Questions

1. When you think about a caring teacher – what are the first thoughts that come to your mind?

2. Can you think of a high school teacher that you believe really cared for you? (If yes, proceed to the next statement. If no, move on to question four). I want you to think about the teacher that you believe was your most caring high school teacher when you answer the following questions:
   a. What specifically did this teacher do to make you feel like he or she really cared for you?
   b. What characteristics of caring did this teacher demonstrate? Explain your thinking.
   c. Tell me a story about this teacher that made you feel like he or she cared for you.
   d. Now I want to know about four specific areas in regard to this teacher. I’ll explain four activities of a caring teacher, and I want to know if you believe the teacher did these things. If so, I would like for you to explain your thinking and provide examples:
      i. Do you feel like this teacher modeled care to you? Do you believe he or she demonstrated to you what care should look like in his or her interactions with others? Explain.
      ii. Do you feel like this teacher engaged in dialogue with you? Did he or she constantly talk, listen, and interact with you to find out more about your interests and preferences? Explain.
      iii. Do you feel like the teacher allowed you to practice care? Did the teacher provide opportunities to work together with others to improve cooperation and sharing? Explain.
iv. Do you feel like the teacher used **confirmation**? Did the teacher push you and encourage you to do your best? Explain.

e. How did teacher care affect your performance/motivation to do well in this class?

3. Can you think of another high school teacher that you believe really cared for you? (If yes, proceed to the next statement. If no, move on to question four). I want you to think about the teacher that you believe was your second-most caring high school teacher when you answer the following questions:

a. What specifically did this teacher do to make you feel like he or she really cared for you?

b. What **characteristics of caring** did this teacher demonstrate? Explain your thinking.

c. Tell me a story about this teacher that made you feel like he or she cared for you.

d. Now I want to know about four specific areas in regard to this teacher. I’ll explain four **activities of a caring teacher**, and I want to know if you believe the teacher did these things. If so, I would like for you to explain your thinking and provide examples:

   i. Do you feel like this teacher **modeled** care to you? Do you believe he or she demonstrated to you what care should look like in his or her interactions with others? Explain.

   ii. Do you feel like this teacher engaged in **dialogue** with you? Did he or she constantly talk, listen, and interact with you to find out more about your interests and preferences? Explain.

   iii. Do you feel like the teacher allowed you to **practice** care? Did the teacher provide opportunities to work together with others to improve cooperation and sharing? Explain.

   iv. Do you feel like the teacher used **confirmation**? Did the teacher push you and encourage you to do your best? Explain.

e. How did teacher care affect your performance/motivation to do well in this class?

4. Ok let’s shift gears. When you think of a teacher that doesn’t seem to care for students – what are the first thoughts that come to your mind?
5. Can you think of a teacher that you believe really did not care about you? (If yes, proceed to the next statement. If no, move on to question seven). I want you to think about the teacher that you believe was your least caring high school teacher when you answer the following questions:

   a. What specifically did this teacher do to make you feel like he or she really didn’t care for you?
   b. What characteristics did this teacher demonstrate that made you feel like he or she didn’t care for you? Explain your thinking.
   c. Tell me a story about this teacher that made you feel like he or she didn’t care for you.
   d. Now I want to know about four specific areas in regard to this teacher. I’ll explain four activities of a caring teacher, and I want to know if you believe the teacher did these activities. Please explain your thinking and provide examples:
      i. Do you feel like this teacher modeled care to you? Do you believe he or she demonstrated to you what care should look like in their interactions with others? Explain.
      ii. Do you feel like this teacher engaged in dialogue with you? Did he or she constantly talk, listen, and interact with you to find out more about your interests and preferences? Explain.
      iii. Do you feel like the teacher allowed you to practice care? Did the teacher provide opportunities to work together with others to improve cooperation and sharing? Explain.
      iv. Do you feel like the teacher used confirmation? Did the teacher push you and encourage you to do your best? Explain.
   e. How did teacher care affect your performance/motivation to do well in this class?
   f. What could this teacher have done differently in order for he or she to care for you more?
   g. What advice would you give this teacher?

6. Can you to think of another teacher that you believe really did not care about you? (If yes, proceed to the next statement. If no, move on to question seven). I want you to
think about the teacher that you believe was your second-least caring high school teacher when you answer the following questions:

a. What specifically did this teacher do to make you feel like he or she didn’t care for you?

b. What **characteristics** did this teacher demonstrate that made you feel like he or she didn’t care for you? Explain your thinking.

c. Tell me a story about this teacher that made you feel like he or she didn’t care for you.

d. Now I want to know about four specific areas in regard to this teacher. I’ll explain four **activities of a caring teacher**, and I want to know if you believe the teacher did these activities. Please explain your thinking and provide examples:

   i. Do you feel like this teacher **modeled** care to you? Do you believe he or she demonstrated to you what care should look like in their interactions with others? Explain.

   ii. Do you feel like this teacher engaged in **dialogue** with you? Did he or she constantly talk, listen, and interact with you to find out more about your interests and preferences? Explain.

   iii. Do you feel like the teacher allowed you to **practice** care? Did the teacher provide opportunities to work together with others to improve cooperation and sharing? Explain.

   iv. Do you feel like the teacher used **confirmation**? Did the teacher push you and encourage you to do your best? Explain.

   e. How did teacher care affect your performance/motivation to do well in this class?

   f. What could this teacher have done differently in order for he or she to care for you more?

   g. What advice would you give this teacher?

**Compare comments that the participant made in regard to the teachers that demonstrated care and did not demonstrate care. If disconfirming evidence occurs, address it in this section.**

7. It appears that you made similar comments to describe a teacher that was caring and a teacher that was not caring (identify participant comments that were similar). I am
surprised that the experiences you explained appeared to be very similar, yet described two very different people. Can you help to clarify this for me?

a. If there was a difference, please explain your thought process.

**Or, if there was no disconfirming evidence:**

8. Can you think of a time when “what works” for one student does not work for another student in terms of when a teacher is attempting to demonstrate care for a student?

9. How might teachers show their care for students in different ways?

10. Do you think that it is important that a teacher cares for their students? Explain your thinking.

11. Do you think that teacher care for students was an issue at your high school? Explain your thinking.

12. Do you have any other comments as it pertains to the topic of teacher care?

(If necessary, set up date and time for follow-up interview)

Thank you so much for taking part in this interview. I appreciate your time and insights.

At this time, your interview is complete.

(Stop interview recording)

Before you leave, I want to make sure you understand our next steps. Right now, I am going to upload the transcript to a website called Cybox. Once the transcript is uploaded and saved to the Cybox website, the original transcript will be deleted.

(Upload transcript to Cybox. Delete transcript)

After you leave, I am going to replace all participant names with fake names. I am also going to fix any transcription errors caused as a result of using the talk to text application. Once this has been done, I am going to email you a link to the Cybox website which will have the transcript of your interview. This link will allow you to access the interview transcript from home. If there is a portion of the interview you no longer want included in
the final product, you are asked to contact me by email. I will delete any piece of transcript data that you would like removed. If I do not hear from you within three weeks of you receiving the transcript, I will send you another follow-up email reminding you about requesting the changes. If I do not hear from you after two weeks of receiving this second email I will assume any contents of the original transcript may be used in my dissertation or any other work that results from my research.

Also, please remember that if at any time during the five weeks after you receive your interview transcript you do not feel comfortable being a part of this process, you may remove yourself from the project.

Does all of this make sense?

(Allow participant to respond)

What is your email address? Remember that your email address will not appear anywhere in the research and will be deleted after data analysis is complete.

(Allow participant to give you their email address)

Thanks again for your participation in the interview and please contact me with any concerns about your transcript.
APPENDIX D. EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Jared Smith
214 High St.
Waterloo, IA 50702

Dear Project Participant:

Thank you for taking part in the interview for my Dissertation research project called Student Perceptions of Teacher Care: Experiences and Voices of Recent High School Graduates. I sincerely hope that you enjoyed our conversation about your perceptions of the teacher care you experienced during your high school career.

I encourage you to look over and read through the transcript of your interview when you have a few minutes. As you are reading through the transcript, there may be parts of the transcript that you no longer feel comfortable sharing. If you find portions of the interview you no longer want included in any part of the research (such as the dissertation or other presentations), please email me at jasmit82@iastate.edu. At this time I will gladly take out any part of the conversation that you would like deleted.

The following is the link to your interview transcript: (Insert link here)

If I do not hear from you within three weeks of receiving this transcript, I will send you another follow-up email requesting you to send me any changes that you would like to see in the transcripts. Once you receive this follow-up email you will have two more weeks to respond. If I do not hear from you after those two more weeks I will assume that all contents of the original transcript may be used for the final product.

Also, please remember that if at any time during the next five weeks you do not feel comfortable being a part of this process, you may remove yourself from the project.

Thanks again for your participation in the interview and please contact me with any concerns about your transcript.

Sincerely,

Jared Smith
Iowa State University
School of Education
APPENDIX E. FOLLOW-UP EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Jared Smith  
214 High St.  
Waterloo, IA 50702  

Dear Project Participant:  

Thank you for taking part in the interview for my Dissertation research project called *Student Perceptions of Teacher Care: Experiences and Voices of Recent High School Graduates*. I sincerely hope that you enjoyed our conversation about your perceptions of the teacher care you experienced during your high school career.  

I encourage you to look over and read through the transcript of your interview when you have a few minutes. As you are reading through the transcript, there may be parts of the transcript that you no longer feel comfortable sharing. If you find portions of the interview you no longer want included in any part of the research (such as the dissertation or other presentations), please email me at jasmit82@iastate.edu. At this time I will gladly take out any part of the conversation that you would like deleted.  

The following is the link to your interview transcript: (Insert link here)  

If I do not hear from you within two weeks of receiving this follow-up email I will assume that all contents of the original transcript may be used for the final product.  

**Also, please remember that if at any time during the next two weeks you do not feel comfortable being a part of this process, you may remove yourself from the project.**  

Thanks again for your participation in the interview and please contact me with any concerns about your transcript.  

Sincerely,  

Jared Smith  
Iowa State University  
School of Education
APPENDIX F. COMMUNITY RESOURCE SHEET

During the interview process, participants are asked to give their perceptions of the teacher care they received from the teachers they had during their high school careers. Considering participants are asked to discuss negative experiences with teachers, there is a chance the discussion may lead to extreme adverse feelings that could include anger, sorrow, regret, resentment, depression, etc. There may be cases when participants choose to follow-up with mental health experts in order to receive additional treatment services for dealing with these experiences.

Below are phone numbers for local (Waterloo/Cedar Falls) mental health and crisis centers if you feel this additional help is necessary:

**University of Northern Iowa Student Health Clinic**  
016 Student Health Center  
Cedar Falls, IA 50614  
319-273-2009

**Black Hawk County Mental Health Center**  
3251 W 9th St.  
Waterloo, IA 50702  
319-234-2893

**Pathways Behavioral Services (Mental Health)**  
3362 University Ave.  
Waterloo, IA 50701  
319-235-6571

**Lutheran Services**  
904 W. 4th St  
Waterloo, IA 50702  
319-233-3579

**New Directions Counseling Services**  
3136 Brockway Rd.  
Waterloo, IA 50701  
319-232-2086

**Life-Line Resources**  
1402 Logan Ave.  
Waterloo, IA 50703  
319-234-1572
## APPENDIX G: PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

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APPENDIX H: IRB APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
141 E Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2167

Date: 7/22/2016
To: Jared R Smith
5329 Meadowlark Lane
Cedar Falls, IA 50613

CC: Dr. Joanne Marshall
N299A Lagomarcino

Dr. Jan Westerman-Beatty
N131 Lagomarcino Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Effective Teacher Interactions - Perceptions of High School Graduates

IRB ID: 15-687

Approval Date: 7/22/2016 Date for Continuing Review: 1/4/2018

Submission Type: Modification Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 50), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 202 Kingland, to officially close the project.

Please don’t hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.
REFERENCES


Shafer, D. J. (2015). Preservice teacher understanding and implementation of caring teaching learning student relationships.


