

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER EMPATHY IN
CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Harold Wade Brackins

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of teacher empathy for middle school students at two Christian academies in central Alabama. Extant studies have contributed to the theoretical, empirical, and practical understanding of teacher empathy, but few have captured the voices of middle school students to understand their lived experiences; no studies have explored the topic in Christian academies. The theories guiding this study were Rogers' theory of self and subsequent theories about student-centered pedagogy. The central research question was focused on the perceptions of teacher empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies. Four research sub-questions were designed to dissect teacher empathy along cognitive, affective, and behavioral lines. Data collection in this transcendental phenomenological study included individual interviews with 10 students purposely selected from two schools, a focus group session with six of the participants, and letters written to hypothetical future middle school teachers. Data analysis followed Moustakas' process of bracketing, open coding, and thematic analysis, yielding major themes of teacher engagement, means of empathy, immediate impact, and long-term impact. Findings revealed middle school students perceived teacher empathy as a relational process that positively impacted their personal and academic growth. A major implication for decision-makers is the necessity to prioritize relational cultures; administrators at Christian academies should also prioritize the inclusion of distinct Christian elements like prayer and scripture. The implication for teachers is the necessity to build ongoing, nonjudgmental, and transparent relationships that lead to functional, fundamental, and profound empathic opportunities.

Keywords: affective empathy, behavioral empathy, cognitive empathy, functional empathy, fundamental empathy, profound empathy, teacher empathy

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, beginning with my parents. A career sailor who went from earning his GED to being an award-winning high school teacher wed to a tenacious, fiercely dedicated homemaker for more than 60 years, my parents have epitomized these words from the late Rich Mullins: never picture-perfect, just a plain man and his wife, who somehow knew the value of hard work, good love, and real life. This work is also dedicated to my four children—Andrew, Rachel, Nathan, and Lydia—who, although grown and blazing their own trails, offered priceless encouragement through this process. Finally, my greatest measure of thanks goes to Janet, my bride for more than 30 years. There is no way I could have reached this point without her sacrifice, encouragement, and empathic ear. I am eternally grateful for the way she stands beside me, and I am excited for what the future holds for the two of us.

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Numerous professors in the Liberty University School of Education were instrumental to the success of this doctoral journey; the attention and dedication from three in particular merit special acknowledgement. Dr. James Swezey's enthusiasm and personal counsel as Liberty's lead qualitative professor fueled my desire to research through story-telling. Through more than a year as my committee chair, Dr. Kenneth Tierce patiently provided insight and guidance that were indispensable to transforming my ramblings into organized scholarly thoughts.

Additionally, I am grateful to Dr. R.Mark Beadle for agreeing to serve on my committee and providing feedback that ensured scholarly integrity in my writing. As I close this chapter and look forward to putting what I've learned to work for God's kingdom, I do so with the knowledge that it would not have been possible without the biblically-grounded expertise of these men. Finally, nothing accomplished in these three-plus years of study would have been possible without Almighty God. God, through the prophet Isaiah, said, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD" (Isaiah 55:8), yet through this process he has revealed more about himself and me than I could have imagined. I pray to honor him with any effort that may result from this work.

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List of Abbreviations

American Humanist Association (AHA)

Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)

Capital Christian Academy (CCA)

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Midstate Christian Academy (MCA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Centuries ago, a sage cleric and educational pioneer asserted that if teachers “treat their pupils kindly they will easily win their affections, and will bring it about that they prefer going to school to remaining at home” (Comenius, 1896, p. 131). At the core of a teacher’s capacity to engage in relational pedagogy as Comenius described is the ability to understand “how deeply appreciative students feel when they are . . . simply understood from their own point of view, not the teacher’s” (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p. 158). In other words, such relationships require teacher empathy. Extensively studied in clinical settings, the concept of empathy remains difficult to define (Cuff et al., 2016), but is internationally recognized as a critical educator disposition (Klassen et al., 2018) and specified as part of an exemplary middle school experience (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2010). Thus, further research is needed to understand how teacher empathy affects early adolescent students. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a foundation and rationale for conducting a qualitative study of adolescent students’ experiences of teacher empathy, beginning with the historical, social, and theoretical contexts of the problem and then situating myself with regard to philosophical assumptions and paradigms. Clear statements of the problem and the purpose for the study are followed by a discussion of the significance of the study, literature-supported research questions, and definitions of key terms.

Background

Teacher empathy plays a central role in educational practices that have grown from sterile and mechanistic to student-centered and relational (Gutek, 2011), driving the need for greater understanding among administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders. According to Johann Herbart, “teacher empathy forms the central element of pedagogical love, which, together

with the teacher's authority, is the basis of his or her pedagogical work" (Štěrbá, 2018, p. 625). Similarly, Rogers and Freiberg (1994) associated the likelihood of significant learning with insightful teachers who seek to understand pedagogical experiences from the perspectives of their students. Scholars and theorists have extensively explored the roots of empathy in general as well as the emergence of teacher empathy, highlighting their evolution in various settings. Although theoretical principles for empathy applications in clinical settings are well established, applications for the educational realm—especially for young adolescents—are less clear (Cuff et al., 2016). The following sections address the historical, social, and theoretical contexts of the phenomenon of teacher empathy, highlighting the need for further study in middle school settings at private, Christian academies.

Historical Context

Generally considered an innate human emotion (Krznaric, 2015; Zhou et al., 2019), the implications of empathy can be found as far back as biblical passages that describe Jesus as being empathetic (i.e., Hebrews 2:14, Hebrews 4:15-16) and that direct Christ-followers to act empathetically (i.e., Romans 12:15). Early 20th-century philosophers and psychologists such as Tichener combined the German concept of *emfühlung* (feeling with or feeling into) and the Greek *empathia* (in suffering or passion) to settle on a description of empathy as a natural capacity towards feeling what we perceive (McAlinden, 2018). While defending its innate nature, a more contemporary definition also describes empathy as an art to be imaginatively employed (Krznaric, 2015). With his theories regarding client-centered therapy, Rogers (1959) pioneered the inclusion of empathy in psychological settings followed by similar approaches to psychoanalysis by Kohut (Eklund, 2006). Rogers' therapeutic applications found a natural home in other clinical settings such as medicine (Bouton, 2016; Roche & Harmon, 2017; Sinclair et al.,

2017; Sinclair et al., 2016) and counseling (Bloom et al., 2018), yet inclusion in the field of education was slower to develop (Cornelius-White, 2007). Even as the concept gained traction influenced by Rogers' student-centered educational offshoot (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), research on teacher empathy has been limited by the complexity of the topic evidenced by a multitude of definitions (Cuff et al., 2016). Early research determined that a natural disposition toward empathy did not automatically translate to expressions of empathy from teachers, which highlighted the need for professional development efforts (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). Recent studies, presented primarily from the views of older students and teachers, approach teacher empathy as one of many components affecting relationships (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016).

Social Context

Although the preponderance of students in the United States attend public and charter schools, it is significant that 28% of the elementary, middle, and secondary schools in the United States were private as of 2015, serving approximately 4,800,000 (nearly 10%) of the nation's students. Of that number, 75% were characterized as Christian schools (Ee et al., 2018). Anecdotal evidence suggests that empathy is best exercised and observed in small group or small classroom settings (Cooper, 2010). Hence, the typically low student-to-teacher ratio in most private schools should provide fertile environments for such behavior. Furthermore, the biblical foundation of many Christian schools establishes an expectation of human dignity of which empathy is a part (Schweitzer, 2016). The research in private, Christian education environments covers a broad spectrum of topics like the use of public funds for vouchers to attend private schools (Bowen & Trivitt, 2014); the perceived negative, exclusionary aspects of private education (Marples, 2018); and students' civic development (Cross et al., 2018). Other studies explored relational and pedagogical dynamics within parochial schools (Harding-DeKam & Ben-

Peretz, 2014; Joseph et al., 2017; Shields et al., 2016). An investigation of desirable teacher dispositions was restricted to the adult voices of graduates from international Christian schools (Linton, 2015). The voice of adolescent students in this fertile environment is needed to better understand teacher empathy.

Theoretical Context

Although the term *empathy* would not have been included in his vocabulary, as early as the 1650s Comenius advocated for a holistic, student-centered approach to education founded on humane teacher-student relationships (Gutek, 2011). Citing biblical insistence on the value of mankind as God’s image-bearers, Comenius demanded that instructors not “alienate their pupils from them by roughness, but attract them by fatherly sentiments and words. . . . In a word, if they treat their pupils kindly they will easily win their affections” (Comenius, 1896, p. 131). Although more utilitarian approaches to education dominated during the subsequent three centuries (Gutek, 2011), in the early 20th century Vygotsky and Piaget developed learning theories that emphasized the prominent role of the learner’s ability to construct knowledge (Illeris, 2018). After an interlude during which Skinner’s behaviorism dominated (Illeris, 2018), Rogers (1959), albeit from a nonreligious humanistic standpoint, reignited the call for student-centered pedagogy as an extension of his theories of personality and interpersonal relationships—often referred to as self-theory. Rogers asserted that to be fully functioning, a person requires unconditional positive regard from others, an impossibility without empathy. Recent research has further illuminated the cognitive and affective aspects of empathy (Krznaric, 2015; van Zonneveld et al., 2017), the various stages of teacher empathy (Cooper, 2010), and the process of incorporating student intentions and beliefs (mentalization) to more effectively enter their worlds (Swan & Riley, 2015). Still missing, however, was the voice of middle school students to

validate these theories in the minds of the learners, a key component of learner-centered pedagogy.

Situation to Self

Following a 20-year career as an Air Force officer, I spent 11 years as a teacher and administrator at a mid-sized Christian academy in Alabama. The concluding nine years were in the middle school, where I served as the assistant principal. Understanding the reluctance some express when faced with the thought of working with middle school students, it was nonetheless this age group that I came to love. Rather than seeing middle school as the place for students to survive while waiting for high school, I chose to see the adolescent years of physical, psychological, and intellectual changes as invaluable in their progress toward full maturity in Christ (Powell, 2015). After a particularly trying year during which several young teachers struggled to understand adolescent development and the importance of strong teacher-student relationships as advanced by the AMLE (2010), I attended a leadership conference sponsored by that organization. One presenter asked us to pick words we would want campus visitors to use in describing our schools; almost immediately, and I believe providentially, *empathetic* came to mind. I approached the subsequent school year determined to help our staff embrace the empathetic example Jesus presented in Hebrews 4:15. I was keenly interested in hearing the voices of young adolescents describe their experiences with teacher empathy to better inform Christian school administrators who seek to create environments conducive to advancing God's kingdom (G. Schultz, 2005; Van Brummelen, 2009).

In line with my motivation, my philosophical assumptions stem from a Christian theistic worldview (Sire, 2009). Ontologically, I operate from the perspective that God is the central reality and the Creator from which all other reality flows. Because God is transcendent, mankind

can never fully know him (Isaiah 55:8-9), but we can observe a reality that is orderly yet not closed, as God's decisions and mankind's decisions are impactful. In short, "The course of the world's operation is open to reordering by either" (Sire, 2009, p. 32). Similarly, my assumption about the nature of knowledge (epistemology) is that we can know God and his creation because he has created in humans the capacity and desire to learn, and he communicates about himself and creation through general and special/individual revelation (Sire, 2009). Thus, early adolescents are capable of observing phenomena around them and are also capable of communicating their discoveries. Finally, my axiological (values) assumption is that, because God is the prime reality and never changes (Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17; Numbers 23:19), his standards of right and wrong are constant as well (Sire, 2009). The value that is most salient to this study is that every human is created in God's image (Genesis 1:27), and thus every student possesses worth and dignity that warrant honor from teachers.

I conducted this research project from a social constructivist standpoint, believing that individuals craft subjective meanings to phenomena to understand the world around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These meanings are not transcribed or imprinted in advance nor in a vacuum; on the contrary, they are influenced by reciprocal relationships between personal and environmental determinants such as social interaction and cultural norms (Bandura, 1977). As posited by Piaget, learners adjust their mental schemes and meanings as they assimilate new information (Illeris, 2018). The social constructivist approach is not antithetical to the previously-mentioned theistic assumptions as long as the assignment of meaning is not substituted by re-assignment or redefinition of truth. In the same way that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John ascribed different details and meanings to the life of Jesus without redefining his identity (English Standard Version Bible, 2001), students in a

phenomenological study help illuminate the essence of the phenomenon by ascribing different meanings and perspectives based on individual experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Problem Statement

Bouton (2016) noted most teachers can attest that empathy looks different in a class of 30 or more students than it does in one-on-one clinical scenarios, driving the need for more clarity in definition and practice for teacher empathy. Bouton (2016) and Swan and Riley (2015) built upon clinical definitions to include concepts of care and student desires and feelings, and Cooper (2010) conceptualized large-group empathy in terms of fundamental, profound, and functional empathy. Recent studies also added clarity by specifying teacher behaviors such as perspective-taking, establishing family connections, hearing student stories to understand underlying dynamics, and being readily available to students (Rodriguez et al., 2020; Warren, 2018). In short, teacher empathy has been shown to be a unique disposition considered critical for teacher and student success (Klassen et al., 2018), but the lived experiences of middle school students was largely missing from the research to inform definition and behavior. Also missing was research involving the significant percentage of students in private schools, especially Christian schools where empathic dispositions could be expected to flourish. Hence, the problem studied was the lived experience of teacher empathy as voiced by middle school students in private, Christian academies.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experience of teacher empathy for middle school students at two Christian academies in central Alabama. Teacher empathy is generally defined as the ability of the teacher to account for cognitive and affective elements to express concern for and take the perspective of students

(Swan & Riley, 2015). The theory guiding this study was Rogers' (1959) self-theory as it asserts the central role of empathy in the development of fully functioning person.

Significance of the Study

This research study contributes to the body of knowledge concerning teacher empathy in theoretical, empirical, and practical ways. Theoretically, this study adds to the understanding of Rogers' (1959) theory of self by expounding on the role of empathy in establishing unconditional positive regard, a critical component of developing fully functioning persons and engaging the holistic needs of students (AMLE, 2010). Data from middle-school student voices will contribute to the theory that empathy from a significant other plays a role in healthy self-actualization (Rogers, 1959) by identifying the level of impact in early adolescence. The study also expands understanding of Rogers' theory of interpersonal relationships by gaining perspective on the impact of empathic teacher relationships on future student success. Similarly, as young adolescents relate their experiences with empathic teachers, educators may glean knowledge about moving from a behaviorist object-view of students to a relational subject-view in support of interpersonal theories (Eklund, 2006; Rogers, 1959). Answering research questions regarding adolescent perceptions and descriptions of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of teacher empathy, the study illuminates the impact each element has on teacher-student interpersonal relationships. Finally, this study adds to knowledge concerning humanistic, student-centered pedagogical theories. Young adolescent impressions of teachers seeking out individual student needs will be valuable indicators to the applicability of theories advanced by Comenius (1896) and Rogers and Freiberg (1994).

Although there are qualitative studies including young adolescent voices concerning education, explicit focus on teacher empathy is very rare (Newcomer, 2018), and no literature on

the phenomenon within private, Christian academies exists. This study adds to the empirical literature base by first answering research questions on cognitive, affective, and behavioral teacher empathy, highlighting the distinct yet interconnected features of each element (Lam et al., 2011; Lishner et al., 2017) in a rarely-explored environment. Rather than capturing the voices of high school seniors and graduates who were asked to recall experiences from their pasts, this study offers a real-time perspective by capturing experiences at an earlier age. Answers to interview and focus-group questions in this study also add to the literature base concerning the effects of teacher empathy on various classroom aspects. For example, students offered opinions on the impact of teacher empathy on teacher-student relationships, contributing to literature that highlights empathy as a key to fostering family and community relationships (Klassen et al., 2018; Peck et al., 2015; White & Levers, 2017). Students also offered perspectives on the impact of teacher empathy on classroom motivation similar to previous studies (Frelin, 2015; Garcia-Moya et al., 2019; Kiefer et al., 2015).

Finally, from a practical standpoint, this phenomenological study provides data to administrators in any middle school setting—especially Christian schools—that may inform institutional professional development efforts. It also supplies data to universities that provide teacher education, better equipping them to intentionally incorporate needed empathy-centered training (Whitford & Emerson, 2019). Answering the research questions about student perceptions of cognitive, affective, and behavioral empathy in teachers, this research provides a practical foundation for educators interested in assessing the ways their thoughts, feelings, and actions combine to communicate empathy to their students (McCreary et al., 2018).

Research Questions

This study of teacher empathy, as a lived experience, and as voiced by middle school students in private, Christian academies, was guided by one central research question and four research subquestions.

Central Research Question (CRQ)

CRQ: What are the perceptions of teacher empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?

The broadness of this question maintained the flexibility for further questions that emerged as student interviews progressed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, this question encompasses Moustakas' (1994) depiction of phenomenology as incorporating the lived experiences of multiple participants into the universal essence of a given phenomenon.

Research Subquestions (SQ)

SQ1: What are the perceptions of teacher cognitive empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?

Interview questions and other activities associated with this question add to the literature indicating that teacher capacity to understand student feelings or emotions (cognitive empathy) is important to student perceptions of empathy (Decety & Howard, 2014; Krznaric, 2015; Swan & Riley, 2015; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007; van Zonneveld et al., 2017).

SQ2: What are the perceptions of teacher affective empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?

Interview questions and other activities associated with this question add to the literature indicating that teacher capacity to experience student feelings or emotions (affective empathy) is

important to student perceptions of empathy (Bouton, 2016; Jaber et al., 2018; Swan & Riley, 2015; Torres et al., 2016).

SQ3: What are the perceptions of teacher behavioral empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?

Interview questions and other activities associated with this question add to the literature indicating that teacher capacity to act in a way that demonstrates understanding of student situations is important to student perceptions of empathy (Bouton, 2016; Lam et al., 2011; Stout, 2019).

SQ4: What are the perceptions of the impact of teacher empathy on student educational and life experiences as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?

Interview questions and other activities associated with this question add to the literature indicating that teacher empathy is important to guiding students toward becoming fully functioning persons (Rogers, 1959) as well as capturing aspects of the universal essence of empathy (Moustakas, 1994).

Definitions

1. *Affective (emotional) empathy* – The capacity to *experience* another person’s feelings or emotions (van Zonneveld et al., 2017).
2. *Behavioral empathy* – Action, either verbal or nonverbal, that demonstrates understanding of and emotional connection with the other person (Lam et al., 2011)
3. *Cognitive empathy* – The capacity to *understand* another’s emotions without necessarily being emotionally involved (van Zonneveld et al., 2017).
4. *Empathic accuracy* – The degree to which a person can accurately perceive the emotions of another person (Eckland et al., 2019).

5. *Empathy* – The capacity to non-judgmentally perceive the internal frame of reference to another person with accuracy by listening to and checking with the other person (Rogers, 1975).
6. *Functional empathy* – Empathy wherein teachers attempt to exercise empathic behaviors toward multiple students in large-group settings (Cooper, 2010).
7. *Fundamental empathy* – Empathy characterized by a teacher-initiated relationship via attentive behaviors such as listening and positive communication (Cooper, 2010).
8. *Mentalization* – Perspective-taking by a teacher in an attempt to view a student's situation by attempting to understand the student's intentions, beliefs, desires, and feelings (Swan & Riley, 2015).
9. *Profound empathy* – Empathy which entails deeper, high-quality bonding as a result of intentional personal time, transparency, and observing subtle clues from students (Cooper, 2010).
10. *Sympathy* – Other-oriented emotional response to another person's negative emotional state that is focused on a desire to alleviate the negative emotional condition (Zhou et al., 2019).
11. *Teacher empathy* – The ability of the teacher to account for cognitive and affective elements to express concern for and take the perspective of students (Swan & Riley, 2015).

Summary

Empathy is a complex human characteristic with numerous definitions dependent on environmental contexts (Cuff et al., 2016). As presented in this chapter, although significant quantitative and qualitative research has been conducted to clarify the definitions and behavioral

components of empathy in education that complement Rogers' (1959) theory of self, valuable pieces are missing with regard to young adolescent voices in private, Christian schools that serve nearly 10% of the national student population. Hence, operating from a Christian theistic worldview and related philosophical assumptions, this phenomenological study addresses the problem of the lived experiences of middle school students in Christian academies, thereby supplementing the theoretical, empirical, and practical bodies of literature. Chapter Two will extensively review theoretical and empirical literature to frame the study that is outlined in the remaining chapters.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Two is to provide a detailed review of the relevant literature on the topic of teacher empathy as experienced by middle school students in Christian academies, beginning with a theoretical framework and progressing to results from empirical research. This study is grounded in Rogers' (1959) theory of self, or self-theory, which conceptualizes the critical role of empathy in establishing unconditional positive regard from significant others as a necessary step to achieving fully functioning personhood. Following the explication of this theory and ideas from Comenius (1896) and Rogers (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) surrounding humanistic, learner-centered education, a review of the relevant literature begins by exploring various meanings of empathy in a general sense and leads to distilling of characterizations of teacher empathy in the classroom. The relevant literature also highlights the importance of strong relationships, characterized by empathy between teachers, students, and families. The relevant literature also points to three themes highlighting the positive role of teacher empathy: increased student motivation, better-informed multicultural pedagogy, and enhanced learning success. The literature review concludes by identifying gaps in the literature that substantiated the need for the current study.

Theoretical Framework

Given the complexity of the role of empathy in general human development as well as its pedagogical applications, a single theory is insufficient to undergird the present study. Thus, this section begins with a discussion of Rogers' (1959) theory of self. Afterward humanistic, learner-centered educational theories drawn from Comenius (1896) and Rogers (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) are presented to highlight the role of empathy in educational settings.

Theory of Self

The use of empathy in helping professions such as education finds its deepest theoretical roots in Carl Rogers' (1959) theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships—alternatively known as theory of self. Reacting to psychotherapeutic methods that were directive and diagnostic, Rogers sought to develop a process of therapy that focused on relational aspects grounded in the patients' experiences (Murphy & Joseph, 2019). Rogers believed that “each person perceives the world or reality according to his internal world, his feelings, emotions, and experiences” (do Socorro Dutra, 2016, p. 414), and he moved to bring those experiences to the fore in a transformative method of psychotherapy.

Rogers' therapy process was based on conceptions of the development of personality and the fully functioning person (Rogers, 1959). He proposed 40 constructs based on the presumption that organisms have tendencies to develop capacities that maintain or enhance themselves. Rogers purported that the process of personality development begins in infancy with self-actualization tendencies. As later reflected in Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theories, Rogers (1959) asserted that the process of growth and maturity leads a person to value experiences via self-experiences and awareness as a result of interaction with the environment and others. The end result of these experiences is a person's self-concept. Rogers then theorized that a person's self-worth is influenced by the need for positive regard from others, and failure to receive such regard may lead to incongruence between a person's self-concept and others' concepts, thus resulting in personality abnormalities (Kapustin, 2016). Rogers (1959) opined that such incongruence is met by defensive reactions such as severe anxiety that often require professional therapy. Thus, his theory of therapy emerged from a desire to help clients re-establish congruence and clear the path for patients to become fully-functioning persons.

It is within Rogers' (1959) associated theory of therapy that empathy emerges as a major theme. Rogers believed that fully-functioning individuals need to experience unconditional positive regard by others; he established six conditions of therapy necessary to lead a person beyond incongruence, most of which focused on the therapist establishing such regard. In Rogers' terms, humans need to feel *prized* by others. Within therapy—later extended to teaching—he determined that holistic prizing of the client is among the most powerful and productive aspects of the therapist-client relationship. Such unconditional regard is impactful whether the client's circumstance produces joy or sadness. Rogers further postulated that the act of prizing allows the therapist to move from an object-view of the client to a subject-view whereby the therapist looks beyond immediate client feelings to see the full life spectrum of the client (Eklund, 2006). These efforts culminate in the helper achieving an internal frame of reference, "the subjective world of an individual. Only he knows it fully. It can never be known to another except through empathic inference and then can never be perfectly known" (Rogers, 1959, p. 210). In that moment, the helper seeks empathy for the client, perceiving and feeling the client's internal frame of reference with accuracy "as if one were the other person" (p. 210).

As Rogers (1959) followed the theories of personality and therapy with his theory of interpersonal relationships, he extended his assertions about the centrality of empathy into other helping arenas such as education. He saw a natural connection between congruence, positive regard, and optimal relationships, determining that his conditions of effective therapy fit naturally into the process of improving relationships. Within education, teacher efforts to empathically show positive regard lead to "more realistic, accurate, and differentiated perceptions and to more responsible basing of behavior upon these perceptions" (Rogers, 1959, p. 241). He later expanded on the importance of empathy, asserting that empathy shown early is

a predictor of later success (Rogers, 1975). Particularly salient to the qualitative nature of this effort to capture the lived experiences of adolescent students, Rogers (1975) insisted the responsibility for empathy lies with the helper; it is not the responsibility of the client (student) to draw it out. Furthermore, the teacher must continually check perceptions with the student because the student is the better judge of the degree of empathy than is the teacher (Rogers, 1975).

Humanistic Learner-Centered Education

As Rogers' (1959) theories progressed, his therapeutic methods became known as person-centered therapy, and subsequent applications to the educational domain led to practices known as learner, or student, centered education. Rogers began articulating his educational thoughts in the 1960s with revisions through the latter part of the 20th century (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). With a focus on the holistic development of students, his propositions fit within the realm of humanistic pedagogical theories that center on concepts of self-actualization (Rogers, 1959). Although his ideas are well known among contemporary scholars, humanistic and relational pedagogical approaches like Rogers' are actually rooted in thoughts advanced by John Amos Comenius in the 1600s (Gutek, 2011). Thus, an explication of a learner-centered pedagogical approach and the role of empathy therein must also include this cleric and educational pioneer.

Before examining the theories of either of these thinkers, however, a discussion of humanism is in order given the divergent worldviews associated with its practice. A general attitude that human beings have a special value that makes their thoughts and desires significant (Sire, 2009), humanist perspectives can be described as religious or secular—for purposes of this study, Christian humanism or secular humanism. The origins of Christian humanism are often

traced to theologian Thomas á Kempis and the Brothers of Common Life religious order which focused on the internal and personal practices of spirituality (Magill, 2017). Brothers of Common Life teachings heavily influenced German cleric Rudolph Agricola, credited as the father of Christian humanism (Magill, 2017; Weiss, 1981), and Dutch philosopher/educator Desiderius Erasmus (Cummings, 2013). These and other philosophers advocated a “blend of Italian humanistic science and Christian ideals” (Akçomak et al., 2016, p. 831) that would lead humans to a fullness expressed by love, justice, and beauty (deGruchy, 2018). With a theological basis that, in Jesus, God paved the way for all others to become fully human (deGruchy, 2018), early Christian humanists are credited with building human capital via printing books and universal, efficient education (Akçomak et al., 2016). Contemporary concepts of Christian humanism are captured in the Christian Humanist Manifesto (Howard & Packer, 1985), which asserts that humans alone are created in God’s image and thus are creative, loving, and capable of distinguishing between good and evil. Affirming the value and dignity of humans, this treatise grounds efforts toward human wellbeing in mankind’s spiritual and moral nature (J. Schultz, 2015).

In contrast, secular humanism highlights the superiority of humans from a natural rather than a spiritual standpoint (Gergen, 2015). Bolstered by scientific discoveries and evolutionary claims in the 1800s, secular humanist thought advanced along the lines of self-actualization articulated by scholars such as Maslow (Gutek, 2011). In the early 20th century, religious questioners like Charles Francis Potter, scientists like Albert Einstein, and philosophers such as John Dewey organized to formalize their assertions that traditional Christian beliefs were obsolete; those beliefs were to be replaced by a new faith centered on naturalism, rationalism, and socialism (American Humanist Association [AHA], 2021; Gergen, 2015). Per the AHA

(2021), humanism is a philosophy of life that affirms human ability and responsibility to live individually fulfilling lives that contribute to the greater good—without the need for supernatural assistance. Secular humanistic principles are best captured in The Humanist Manifesto, first written in 1933 then revised in 1973 and 2003 (AHA, 2021). Because humans are the result of unguided evolutionary processes with no existence beyond physical death, all knowledge may only be gained by rational analysis and observation. With a nature that is not innate but only socially constructed (Gergen, 2015), humans practice ethical values that evolve with societies, and personal fulfillment emerges from individual involvement in advancing human culture for its own sake. From this nontheistic stance, secular humanists assert that intentionally benefitting others in society maximizes individual happiness, nullifying the need for eternal or supernatural motivations (AHA, 2020). True to the evolutionary leanings of secular humanism, some contemporary scholars are calling for an updated approach that focuses less on the individual aspects of this worldview and more on relational humanism that increases the wellbeing of social processes (Gergen, 2015).

Christian humanistic philosophies impacted policies toward institutional education in a significant way through the work of John Amos Comenius in the 17th century. In his seminal *The Great Didactic*, only widely published more than 200 years after his death, Comenius (1896) appealed for a move from the harsh, mechanistic schooling methods of his time. He operated from a biblical stance that portrayed mankind as the highest, most excellent created being, a stance that required educators to view students as God’s image-bearers and eschew harsh methods. Instead, teachers were instructed to kindle a desire to learn with gentleness rather than “alienate by roughness” (Comenius, 1896, p. 130). Seeing school as existing for children rather than the converse, Comenius stressed the ideal of mutual respect between the teacher and the

student (Gutek, 2011) and encouraged teachers to employ methods to “lighten the drudgery of learning, that there may be nothing to hinder the scholars or deter them from making progress with their studies” (Comenius, 1896, p. 130). Comenius consistently used growth in nature as his illustration to champion numerous hallmarks of learner-centered education such as developmentally appropriate curriculum, relevance, and instruction informed by active listening on the part of the teacher (Štěrbá, 2018). These methods formed an early basis for humanistic educational goals such as positive regard for students, encouraging personal student growth, and facilitative learning fueled by encouragement (Schunk, 2016).

As he modeled ideals of human dignity and human rights in students (Schweitzer, 2016), Comenius introduced the concepts of empathy, authenticity, and acceptance that form the foundation of contemporary learner-centered education (Štěrbá, 2018). He encouraged teachers to “adapt his or her interpretation to the level of abilities and understanding of the pupils” (Štěrbá, 2018, p. 622). Austrian educator J. I. Felbiger followed in Comenius’ footsteps a century later, emphasizing a learner-centered approach grounded in gaining the trust of students, getting to know their personalities, and being kind (Štěrbá, 2018). Similarly, in the 1800s, German philosopher and educator Johann Herbart further advanced humanistic empathy, authenticity, and acceptance, asserting that empathy is essential for the pedagogical love and authority which are the bases of educational work (Štěrbá, 2018).

Countering clinical, behaviorist approaches to education prevalent during the Industrial Age, 20th century constructivist theorists like Vygotsky and Piaget reignited humanistic approaches—albeit from a secular humanistic viewpoint—pioneered by Comenius, Felbiger, and Herbart (Schunk, 2016). Additionally, in the 1960s editors of Catholic educational journals called on parochial schools to establish environments characterized by instructional variety,

inquiry learning, strong counseling programs, and other student-centered practices (Ognibene, 2015). They envisioned a “community of learners encouraged by a nonauthoritarian leader who creates and facilitates opportunity for personal, social, and intellectual growth” (Ognibene, 2015, p. 45). From the Catholic perspective, this place of communion, committed to holistic growth in humanity as well as to instilling skills and knowledge, should build moral dignity and facilitate dialogue about faith and culture (Hermans, 2017).

Operating from a decidedly non-religious stance, Rogers (1959) became the spokesman who codified contemporary learner-centered educational principles. Building on his 1959 theories of therapy and self-actualization, Rogers asserted that humanistic, learner-centered schools are designed (a) to enable teachers to foster a climate of trust that would allow natural curiosity to operate, (b) to encourage student participation in all aspects of their education, (c) to help students prize themselves, and (d) to uncover excitement and emotional discovery in students (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Such holistic approaches to student development counter behaviorist pedagogical methods by recognizing the combined effects of student behavior, attitudes, and personality on the human drive for self-actualization (Schunk, 2016). Humanistic educators operate from the premise that learning should be self-directed toward personal goals with facilitation by the teacher (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

True to earlier assertions regarding the roles of effective therapists, Rogers also held that teachers could only accomplish facilitative instruction in the context of strong interpersonal relationships (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Rogers hearkened back to his client-centered theories to assert that the foundation of interpersonal relationships in the classroom is prizing learners’ feelings, opinions, and personhood—a prizing that recognizes students as imperfect persons and thereby establishes trust (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Students describe learner-centered teachers

as those who build on the foundation of trust to value student wellbeing within and beyond school settings (Mælan et al., 2019).

Such prizing is the bedrock of empathic understanding for teachers (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Rogers credited teachers' capacity to be aware of the process of learning as it occurred to the student with enhancing significant learning. In addition to enhancing the learning experience, educators who employ flexibility in the face of student struggles, allow students to express feelings, and reduce school-related stress—sometimes through classroom levity—also contribute to overall student mental health (Mælan et al., 2019). Rogers emphatically summarized his belief in the value of teacher empathy when he stated,

If any teacher set herself the task of endeavoring to make one nonevaluative, acceptant, empathic response per day to a student's demonstrated or verbalized feeling, I believe she would discover the potency of this currently almost nonexistent kind of understanding. (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p. 158)

Rogers' propositions regarding greater student agency in learning developed traction in subsequent reform efforts such as self-directed learning (Christensen et al., 2011; Morris, 2019) and mastery-based learning (Wimberley, 2016). However, even with the demonstrated value of self-actualization and autonomous learning, contemporary research suggests that positive, humanistic relationships with mentors and facilitators remain critical. University students participating in an appreciative inquiry about the value of affective instructor dispositions indicated that professors who focused on care, acceptance, and respect made their classroom experiences more enjoyable and valuable (Naude et al., 2014).

Rogers' and Freiberg's (1994) relational ideals are also clearly reflected in the standards for an exemplary middle school as advanced by the AMLE (2010). The association's

foundational *This We Believe* outlines 16 characteristics that contribute to making middle schools developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable (AMLE, 2010). Within the embedded sphere of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, Rogers' and Freiberg's (1994) relational, learner-centered ideals dominate the narrative. For instance, the concept of prizing is framed in terms of middle school educators valuing young adolescents and being prepared to teach them (AMLE, 2010). Exemplary middle schools are also characterized by environments of partnership and facilitative instruction, reflecting Rogerian ideals of mutual student/teacher engagement in challenging and relevant exploration. Finally, the AMLE calls for middle schools to set the stage for deep empathic interaction by ensuring each student has an adult advocate to guide academic and personal development, advocates who "listen to and guide youth through the ups and downs of school life" (p. 35).

Related Literature

In today's complex educational settings, teachers are called upon to provide instruction to diverse groups of students with complicated life dynamics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). As the foregoing theoretical discussion revealed, teacher empathy is a key component to effective humanistic, learner-centered pedagogy. Effective application of theoretical foundations requires an extensive review of relevant literature to understand empathy in general terms as well as in educational applications. This review begins broadly, looking at literature that draws upon roots in the fields of psychology and medicine; identifying empathy's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components; and distinguishing between empathy and synonymous terms to arrive at an understanding of empathy relevant to education. With that foundation established, this review presents the impact of empathy on relationships between teachers, students, and families as well as empathic influences on student motivation, culturally

responsive pedagogy, and learning success. While there are gaps and subsequent opportunities for future research, this review provides a good starting point for teachers seeking to enhance their empathic capacities.

Empathy Definitions

Consistent throughout the literature is the assessment that no all-encompassing definition of empathy exists. Because empathy plays a significant role in medical settings, social science, and helping environments such as education and counseling, researchers have acknowledged it is a complicated concept often requiring a wide array of definitions. In fact, Cuff et al. (2016) identified 43 distinct definitions; ironically, two of those definitions came from the same document. Complexity notwithstanding, there are commonalities in most definitions. Psychologist Rogers (1975), who pioneered client-centered therapy, defined the term as the capacity to non-judgmentally perceive the internal frame of reference to another person with accuracy by listening to and checking with the other person. He expounded on this definition by stating that an empathic person becomes “at home” (p. 3) in another person’s world and can tell another person, *I hurt (or am pleased) for you as if I were hurt (or pleased)*. Rogers’ emphasis on affect and accuracy is echoed by Zhou et al. (2019), who described the phenomenon as emotional arousal stemming from comprehending another’s affective state in a way that is congruent with the other person’s emotions. Based on their extensive review, Cuff et al. (2016) described empathy as an emotional response to another person that incorporates not only affective components but also cognitive aspects.

Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Empathy

The commonality of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects in empathy points to the concepts of cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and behavioral empathy. Cognitive

empathy refers to the capacity to *understand* another's emotions without necessarily being emotionally involved (van Zonneveld et al., 2017). Cognitive empathy, also known as perspective taking, is crucial to accuracy and congruence (Lishner et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2019). As an extensive literature review by Lam et al. (2011) highlighted, cognitive empathy goes beyond simply understanding the concept of empathy to having the capacity to grasp and own another's perspective. As might be expected, based on understanding, brain development, age, gender, and level of intelligence seem to significantly affect a person's cognitive empathy (Schwenck et al., 2014). Cognitive empathy may also be simpler to express as one is able to imagine, at least partially, the experience of facing a particular situation (Lumma et al., 2019). Although understanding empathy is difficult to achieve by only studying its cognitive aspects, an understanding of how the brain achieves the perspective of another person is important to fully grasp the phenomenon (Krznaric, 2015).

Affective (or emotional) empathy refers to the capacity to *experience* another person's feelings or emotions (van Zonneveld et al., 2017). Literature indicates that the capacity toward affective empathy is well-established early in life (Schwenck et al., 2014), portrayed as a vicarious process, sometimes involving sorrow, originating in childhood that often leads to empathic concern and action (Van der Graaf et al., 2014). A qualitative examination of empathy in spousal relationships substantiated the concept that affective empathy is an inherent, dispositional quality (Verhofstadt et al., 2016). Lishner et al. (2017) expanded the understanding of affective empathy to include a feeling of other-oriented concern. They emphasized that there is a difference between distress over another's situation, which commonly involves a desire to relieve one's own stress, and true empathic concern that is oriented toward the other person. Counter to assumptions otherwise, some current research indicates no significant difference in

affective empathic response to lifelike, dynamic stimuli and static stimuli such as photos, nor is there a general difference in affective empathy between males and females (Kuypers, 2017).

The behavioral aspect of empathy is typically characterized as action, either verbal or nonverbal, that demonstrates an understanding of and emotional connection with the other person (Lam et al., 2011). Although the actions may be designed to affect the other person's situation, they may also be as simple as unconscious behavioral matching as a means of communicating perception of another's situation (Lishner et al., 2017). In addition, the behaviors may not be visible to the outside observer, as the volition or inclination to act or intervene is very real but may not translate to a helping response for a variety of reasons (Lumma et al., 2019). Acknowledging the importance of understanding and feeling the intricacies of another person's situation, the motivation to act to promote his or her welfare is a key empathic component of prosocial behavior (Read, 2019). In the view of one scholar, "even if I am not yet adopting someone's perspective in my interaction with them I may count as empathizing if I am listening to them and asking open questions with a view to achieving empathy" (Stout, 2019, p. 350).

In addition to actively listening, researchers have identified a number of other verbal and nonverbal empathic behaviors (Kraft-Todd et al., 2017; Stellar et al., 2019; Trickey et al., 2016). Empathizers may verbally name and express understanding of the emotion of the other person, offer support, or state respect for the person in addition to employing nonverbal measures like maintaining eye contact or sitting face-to-face with the other person (Trickey et al., 2016). In a study to determine whether empathy is different in response to physical and emotional distress, data indicated a person witnessing emotional suffering exhibits emotion regulation behaviors such as comforting touches or hugs, expressing condolences, engaging in efforts to distract the one suffering, and displaying optimism (Stellar et al., 2019). On the other hand, a person

witnessing physical suffering displayed empathy by trying to reduce physical pain by treating wounds, recruiting others' help, and staying with the sufferer until help arrived. In medical situations, nonverbal empathic behaviors such as open body posture, eye contact, smiling, and appropriate touch increased patient perceptions of empathy, warmth, and competence (Kraft-Todd et al., 2017).

Consistent through the literature is the conclusion that, although the cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes are distinct, all three are interrelated portions of the larger phenomenon of empathy (Lishner et al., 2017). Each aspect is necessary for developing mature prosocial behaviors (Lockwood et al., 2014). As the prior discussion has indicated, “sharing another person’s affective experience and being moved appropriately by it likely requires some minimal cognitive dimension as well” (Read, 2019, p. e12623). While debate surrounds some scholars’ contention that a person first experiences affective empathy then cognitive empathy followed by behavioral empathy, research indicates that there is some significant positive correlation (Lam et al., 2011). These connections enhance the capacity for effectively training those in helping professions to increase their empathic capacities, especially within the cognitive and behavioral domains (Lam et al., 2011). Knowledge of the interrelated nature of the three components also provides educators with a research-based foundation when assessing their own empathic tendencies and those of their students (McCreary et al., 2018).

Empathy and Related Terms

A significant step in grounding a study of the role of teacher empathy is to distinguish empathy from similar terms and phenomena. Contributing to the vague understanding of—and numerous definitions for—empathy is the tendency to assign the term to at least eight other phenomena that actually seem to be numerous components of the general state of empathy

(Batson, 2009). Often used interchangeably with empathy, sympathy refers to the comprehension of another's emotional state, but it generally focuses only on the other person's negative emotion (Zhou et al., 2019). Sympathy is also associated with pity (Sinclair et al., 2017), although sometimes derisively by palliative-care patients who perceive sympathy as being rooted in a lack of understanding and is primarily meant to serve the needs of the observer (Sinclair et al., 2016). Sympathy has been described as being a part of the empathetic motivation to alleviate another's suffering (Feigin et al., 2018), but sympathy does not necessarily translate into entering the other person's world (Williams, 2011). Sympathy allows one to *feel for* another rather than *feeling as or with* another (Cuff et al., 2016), a result of agreeing with another's perspective rather than adopting another's perspective (Stout, 2019). Although an important part of empathic attitudes and behaviors, as a stand-alone sympathy is regarded as insufficient in counseling settings (Bloom et al., 2018), and teachers whose sympathy does not translate to empathy may appear detached or may allow their sympathy to lower standards out of pity (Bryant, 2020). Stout (2019) asserted that "sympathy is limited by the degree to which you can agree with someone, whereas empathy is not" (p. 353) and further described sympathy as an emotional response to empathic perspective-taking.

Compassion is another term commonly used in place of empathy, and like sympathy, is associated with feeling for, rather than with, the suffering of another (Read, 2019). With Latin roots that point to bearing or carrying the suffering of another (LaMothe, 2019), the sensitivity associated with compassion is accompanied by desire and commitment to alleviate or prevent the suffering (Falconer et al., 2019). The propensity to act distinguishes compassion from empathy in the minds of some scholars who assert that comprehending suffering via empathy is a necessary precondition to exercising compassion (LaMothe, 2019). In a qualitative study of

compassion in healthcare, patients were mixed in either identifying empathy as part of compassion or deeming empathy and compassion as distinct characteristics (Kneafsey et al., 2016). Researchers in this case settled on the former perspective, defining compassion in terms of a combination of empathy and sympathy which leads an individual to altruistically alleviate another's suffering.

While the foregoing descriptions distinguish empathy from sympathy and compassion in terms of action and nuances of perspective-taking, a final distinction involves the spectrum of empathy's application. Whereas sympathy and compassion are exercised exclusively in response to negative circumstances in the life of another, Rogers (1959) opined that empathy also has a place in sharing the joy of another. As the Apostle Paul modeled by rejoicing with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15), the capacity to experience one's joy as if one with that person enables those in helping professions to more comprehensively contribute to a client's wellbeing (Rogers, 1959). In a study of the impact of empathy for a partner in positive and negative situations, results indicated that partners empathizing with positive circumstances may provide a greater benefit to the relationship than empathy during negative situations (Andreychik, 2019b). Data suggest that support enacted in times of distress carries risks such as communicating a partner's inability to handle their own problems; alternatively, empathy in non-stressful times may propel the partner toward growth and development (Andreychik, 2019a). A similar study involving mental health providers and teachers indicated that practicing positive empathy decreased worker burnout and increased job satisfaction, the opposite of those practicing negative empathy (Andreychik, 2019a). These results suggest that teachers who identify with the positive and negative situations that students face not only benefit their students—they also benefit themselves.

Empathy Science

Early studies regarding empathy were psychological or behavioral in nature in attempts to identify motivational factors. As previously indicated, most scholars approached their work from the mindset that empathy is an innate human characteristic (Krzmaric, 2015; Zhou et al., 2019). Although Rogers (1959, 1975) connected empathy to a helper experiencing a person's distress or joy, most early research studied empathic responses to distress only. The earliest assumptions in psychology were that empathy was egoistic, assuming that every action is intended to benefit the self, but later studies identified altruistic motivations in participants who chose to help a distressed person even if they received no encouraging feedback or other benefit (Batson et al., 1991; Batson et al., 1981; Smith et al., 1989). Subsequent research began to distinguish between empathy, sympathy, and personal distress (Zhou et al., 2019), indicating that empathic distress and empathic altruism share a neural basis; however, the results were inconclusive about causality (Nakao & Itakura, 2009).

A common characteristic of empathy studies is the frequency of self-reporting, which can be problematic if participants desire to be socially known as empathic (Zhou et al., 2019). Nonetheless, recent research has identified the self-awareness necessary for self-reporting as a key indicator of empathic functioning. For example, participant emotional clarity, or accurately knowing his or her own emotions, significantly affects a person's cognitive empathy (Eckland et al., 2018). Similarly, a healthy self-evaluation combined with empathic accuracy (accurately identifying others' emotions) is closely associated with affective empathy (Eckland et al., 2019). Such self-awareness has been shown to play a role in the development of prospective preschool teachers (Peck et al., 2015), but similar data on prospective middle school teachers is absent.

Despite the preponderance of self-reporting in studies on empathy, some researchers have reported observational data—such as facial, gestural, and vocal measures—noting that these are more reliable than self-reporting but still subject to participant manipulation (Zhou et al., 2019). More reliable measures of changing empathy levels such as skin conductance of electricity and changing heart rates (Zhou et al., 2019) were precursors to reports informed by advanced medical technology like functional magnetic resonance imaging of the brain. Utilizing functional magnetic resonance imaging, research on empathy for the pain of others showed activations of various portions of the cerebral cortex when the participant experienced pain and when the participant empathized with another's pain (Bernhardt & Singer, 2012). Suggesting that more than 10 regions of the brain may be involved in generating empathy, similar studies pointed to the existence of mirror neurons that fire in the dual phenomena of experiencing and observing pain (Krznaric, 2015).

These studies of motivational and physiological factors associated with empathy lend credence to the supposition that empathy is a human characteristic beginning with infancy, but personal levels of empathy are not static (Krznaric, 2015). Bernhardt and Singer (2012) asserted that brain responses are not fixed; rather, personal characteristics affect empathic capacities. Research involving animals, infants, adults, and robots suggests that Learned Matching, wherein social-cognitive learning processes provide empathy modeling, is necessary for the innate characteristics to activate (Heyes, 2018). Thus, of particular importance to the study at hand, experts believe “empathy is not constrained by genetic evolution” (Heyes, 2018, p. 506); instead, empathic capabilities can be improved even in adults (Krznaric, 2015). Reading the letters from this study in which young adolescents describe their experiences of empathy will provide meaningful data for study and improvement in this area.

Christian School Concepts

The definitions and operating practices associated with private Christian schools vary depending on the emphasis placed on religious aspects within the schools. In general terms, a Christian school may be described as an institution that provides a distinct, Christian-based education largely devoid of government funding (Linton, 2015; Wright, 2016), but there are typically more specialized views often dependent on denominational worldviews. For instance, although Catholic schools have longstanding traditions of educating the whole child and impacting impoverished communities from a biblical foundation (Shields et al., 2016), some delineate the definition to apply to schools whose curricula is associated with Protestant viewpoints (Wright, 2016). Other definitions emphasize the missional aspects of Christian schools, stating that such institutions explicitly voice the purpose of instructing by means of a worldview based on biblical values and teaching (Bankston, 2015). Others decry the legitimacy of schools that are Christian in name only or those that promote Christianity yet require no life of faith from staff members, asserting instead that Christian schools must be Christian through all that they do (Piper, 2017). Mission statements for the schools in the current study align them with Roy's (2008) picture of a faith-oriented learning community emanating from a biblical worldview (Bankston, 2015); thus, further discussion of environmental characteristics and teaching practices at such schools is warranted.

As the previous definitions indicate, Christian schools, like their secular counterparts, exist to educate, to instruct, and to instill academic knowledge (G. Schultz, 2005; Van Brummelen, 2009). Highlighting the importance of excellence and commitment to continuous improvement, the top disposition identified by graduates of one Christian school was that their educators were pedagogically qualified, skilled, and trained (Linton, 2015). The distinction of

Christian schools is that traditional academic subjects like math, science, language arts, and history are presented from a biblical perspective with the goal of infusing graduates with a God-centered, rather than a man-centered, worldview (G. Schultz, 2005). Integrating faith into academics, such schools aim to lead learners to discover God's laws and rightly live by them (Van Brummelen, 2009). To facilitate such faith-infused, missional practices, effective Christian schools are characterized by safe and caring environments that account for individual learning differences (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Sire, 2009; Van Brummelen, 2009) and make meaningful connections with families (Linton, 2015) and communities—often in non-academic ways (Shields et al., 2016). The emphasis at effective Christian schools is on relationships that are “sensitive, accepting, inclusive, affirming, and supportive of all members of that community, constantly seeking meaning, cohesiveness, and shalom” (Roy, 2008, p. 40). Such faith-directed learning communities (Roy, 2008) enable students to see—each day and through each class—their current and future roles in God's larger story (DeBoer & Cook, 2018).

Teachers are understandably a key element in establishing such a relational community in Christian schools. Parents of students in international Christian schools, for example, desired highly engaged, relationally strong teachers who model Christian adult living and built meaningful relationships by taking time to know students (Linton, 2015). Supporting literature that highlights the necessity of Christian community, these parents described teachers who have “empathy, compassion, and understanding” (Linton, 2015, p. 199). In addition to functioning as facilitators and academic technicians, teachers in Christian schools contribute to community by ministering as stewards, priests, and shepherds who relationally unfold God's grand story in a way that enables learners to grow in spiritual, relational, and technical ways (Van Brummelen, 2009). In other words, “although specialists may take a designated role as chaplains or spiritual

counselors, each teacher will also seek to function in a complementary, pastoral ministry” (Roy, 2008, p. 41). Such characteristics are modeled in job description elements like “create a strong educational family by developing and maintaining rapport with students, parents, and staff by treating everyone with friendliness, dignity, and consideration” (Grace Christian School, n.d., p. 2) and “develop and maintain rapport with students, parents, and staff by treating others with friendliness, dignity, and consideration” (Houghton Academy, 2017, p. 3).

Biblical Perspectives on Empathy

The biblical record establishes a firm foundation for all Christians, and by extension teachers, to prize others and exhibit empathy based on the premise that humans are created in the image of God and are therefore the pinnacle of God’s creative work (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Genesis 1:26; James 3:10). Empathy was modeled by God as one who, from Martin Luther’s perspective, accompanies humans to pursue a relationship (Klän, 2018). The first indication of this occurs in Genesis 3:8 where God is depicted as walking in the Garden of Eden as though this was a habitual practice of spending time with his prized creation in unique communion (Nesbit, 2018). God’s presence with his people is also portrayed throughout Old Testament accounts, most vividly as he took up residence in the mobile tabernacle during Israel’s wilderness wanderings recorded in the Pentateuch and ultimately within the temple first constructed by Solomon in Jerusalem (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, 1 Kings 6). God’s desire to reside with humans was ultimately expressed by his incarnation in the form of Jesus Christ. The incarnation portrays God side-by-side with humans especially in times of distress, a condition often associated with the need for empathy (Klän, 2018). Granted the name Immanuel— “God with us” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Matthew 1:23)—Jesus

embodied God as a teacher whose tutelage reflected “the graciousness of a God who stoops low to raise up his people” (Moloney, 2016, p. a3148).

Jesus’ empathic purposes are clearly articulated in Hebrews 4:15, where he is described as a high priest able to sympathize with his people because he experienced the full spectrum of temptation (English Standard Version Bible, 2001). Spending meaningful time with outcasts such as lepers, outcast women, and adulteresses (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, John 4, John 8, Luke 17), Jesus consistently identified with people regardless of their behavior with the goal of ultimately transforming their behavior (Moloney, 2016), a pattern espoused by Rogers (1959) two millennia later. The disciples that Jesus designated as apostles recorded his actions and instructed church members to emulate his example. As the most prolific New Testament writer, the Apostle Paul naturally had the most to say about empathic behavior. For instance, Romans 12:15 calls for Christians to “rejoice with those who rejoice, [and] weep with those who weep” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001), an injunction repeated in First Corinthians 12:26. Reminiscent of Rogers’ (1959, 1975) emphasis on understanding another’s perspective *as if* one with them, Paul instructed Christians to “remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Hebrews 13:3). Finally, in a more personalized tone, Paul described empathy by stating, “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, 1 Corinthians 9:22). Thus, educators in Christian academies find clear models of, and clear instruction toward, empathic behavior toward students to advance a biblical worldview.

Teacher Empathy

As earlier established, empathy looks different in a class full of students than it does in one-on-one clinical scenarios, driving the need for more clarity in the definition. Bouton (2016) acknowledged the clinical definitions that emphasize affective and cognitive approaches to entering another person's world, but she asserted that the concept of *care* must be included in a definition for teaching purposes, a sentiment echoed by Williams (2011). Similarly, teachers may utilize mentalization along with cognitive and affective efforts to express concern for, and view situations from, student perspectives (Swan & Riley, 2015). Mentalization broadens efforts to take perspective by attempting to understand student intentions, beliefs, desires, and feelings. Such perspective taking "involves in-the-moment flexibility in responding to unfolding events, and to the ideas, concerns, interpretations, and expressions of personhood to which students give voice" (Henry & Thorsen, 2019, p. 44). In a study during which pre-service teachers examined their feelings after incorrectly answering simple math questions, participants indicated that they shifted from being impatient with student errors to understanding implicit student feelings (i.e., embarrassment or anger) and subsequently changed instructional practices (Ronen, 2020). Exhibiting concern for the whole child, being readily available, and establishing family connections, teachers also operate within a definition of perspective-taking that leads to informed individualized learning experiences (Warren, 2018).

In practical terms, teacher empathy may follow a path beginning with *fundamental empathy*, wherein the teacher establishes a relationship via attentive behaviors such as listening and positive communication, and progressing to *profound empathy*, which entails deeper, high-quality bonding as a result of intentional personal time, transparency, and observing subtle clues from students (Cooper, 2010). Viewing a class of students as a single entity, however, this model suggests that *functional empathy* is more commonplace as teachers attempt, with varying degrees

of success, to exercise empathic behaviors in more generic, one-size-fits-all fashion. Recent research highlighted the benefits of hearing student stories to understand the dynamics (e.g., family, health, or socioeconomic issues) involved in their actions (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Furthermore, in a model of practical ways for teachers to foster and model an empathic ethic of care in the classroom, teachers are encouraged to actively listen, communicate back to students what was perceived, think with empathy (i.e., recall self in a similar situation), and then speak an appropriate response (Bryant, 2020). These suggestions are particularly impactful in multi-cultural settings where the teacher may be in the minority (a concept discussed in more depth later in this review).

Teacher Empathy and Teacher-Student-Family Relationships

A review of the literature indicates that the capacity of teachers to enter the worlds of their students—i.e., to show empathy—is critical to building positive teacher-student-family relationships. Generally speaking, relationships with important adults such as teachers, coaches, and parents that are characterized by empathy, trust, and mutuality are important to overall positive youth development. When asked to describe characteristics of teachers with whom they experienced close connections, adolescents in a mixed-methods study spoke nearly unanimously about teachers exhibiting such empathic behaviors as warmth, legitimate concern about out-of-school activities, and personable attitudes in the classroom (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016). Urban students aged 14-20 used phrases such as “talks about my life” and “helps me get to my interests and goals” to identify empathy as part of a broad range of supportive behaviors that built strong teacher-student relationships (McHugh et al., 2013, para. 44). In contrast, these students commented that they infrequently encountered such behaviors, leading them to ascertain that most teachers did not want to get to know them.

In addition to establishing trust, regular empathy-fueled interactions initiated by teachers have been instrumental to establishing rapport and increasing student acceptance of relationships with adults (Rodriguez et al., 2020). As exemplified in a study of teachers in inclusive preschool classes, educators who employ empathy by accepting and understanding their students' learning styles or challenges are also equipped to understand student-family cultures and cultivate much needed positive relationships with the families (Peck et al., 2015). The impact on family relationships is not restricted to inclusive environments, however, as White and Levers (2017) deduced from conversations with parents of elementary students in *regular* classrooms. Faced with significant and stressful curricular changes over the course of a school year, parents and teachers in White and Levers' study agreed that mutual empathy played a significant role in fostering strong relationships that were essential to seeing the process through.

Research also points to the universal importance of teacher empathy to establishing strong relationships between teachers, students, and families. In a qualitative study to identify critical non-cognitive attributes of novice teachers across four diverse nations (England, Finland, Malawi, and Oman), researchers determined that, after accounting for cultural differences, empathy and teachers' relationships with the community were included with organization and resilience as common characteristics (Klassen et al., 2018). Such reports establish the foundation that teacher empathy is a key component of positive teacher-student-family relationships in general terms; further study reveals that such relationships are particularly important to enhancing student motivation, developing culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, and enhancing academic/learning success in students.

Teacher Empathy and Student Motivation

Numerous studies, predominantly qualitative in nature, presented perspectives that teachers who establish connections through empathic relationships significantly impact student motivation to learn, especially at the middle school level. For instance, as teachers practice perspective-taking, research points toward short-term and long-term impacts on student motivation. In early research on factors affecting student motivation, seventh grade students indicated that teacher instructional practices and supportive behaviors were critical (O'Connell Schmakel, 2008). Teacher empathy—expressed by being habitually encouraging and by understanding student needs, life stresses, and special qualities in students—was singled-out as a key motivationally-supportive behavior. In an ethnographic case study of language arts classes, students identified interactional perspective-taking practices by teachers—being lighthearted, including appropriate jokes—as significant to their motivation to learn (Henry & Thorsen, 2019). Such perspective-taking encourages alternative ways of knowing and expressing for the students, part of the positive impacts “teachers make in the lives of students that, over time, accumulate and result in more enduring motivational practices” (Henry & Thorsen, 2019, p. 48).

Teachers who understand adolescent development and who are subsequently responsive to basic developmental needs are particularly effective; students expressed that authentic connections highlighted by listening, learning about families and student out-of-school activities boosted their motivation, classroom engagement, and sense of belonging (Kiefer et al., 2015; Kiefer et al., 2014). Similarly, quantitative and qualitative data have pinpointed teacher empathic characteristics including approachability, understanding, and helpfulness as factors to increasing middle school students' motivation and confidence to learn science (Smart, 2014). In agreement that empathic teacher behavior in interpersonal relationships positively impacts student motivation, Garcia-Moya et al. (2019) also asserted that 11-18-year-old students are motivated

by teachers who build humanizing relationships with their instructional practices. In addition, although the term “like” is fraught with opportunities for misuse, quantitative research has indicated that middle school students are more motivated to learn from teachers they like as a result of close, emotional, teacher-initiated relationships (Raufelder et al., 2016). However, it is not only secondary students who find empathic experiences beneficial in motivating one to learn. In Frelin’s (2015) qualitative study, students self-identifying as having *no motivation* who had failed traditional schooling efforts experienced dramatic turnarounds as a result of a program distinguished by professional closeness, humaneness, and empathy.

Teacher Empathy and Culturally Relevant/Responsive Pedagogy

Given the growing diverse nature of student bodies contrasted with a mostly White, female teaching force (Warren, 2018), it is significant that a theme in the literature highlights the role of teacher empathy in developing and practicing culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. One of the major voices in this arena is a Michigan State University professor, Warren (2015b, 2018), who encouraged teachers to focus on perspective-taking through conversations or student journaling to know their students of color; upon establishing that connection, teachers should then adjust instructional practices to meet student needs. Sometimes critical of apparent contradictions between the stated intentions and actual practices of White teachers, Warren (2015a) has developed a scale of teacher empathy for African American males (S-TEAAM) that has been reliable for measuring teachers’ conceptions and practices while also establishing the value of empathy in multicultural settings (Warren, 2015b).

Lastly, recent researchers have also explored the impact of empathy on disciplinary practices regarding non-White students (Whitford & Emerson, 2019). In a quantitative study, an

empathy intervention administered to White pre-service teachers proved statistically significant in decreasing implicit bias toward Black individuals regarding disciplinary actions.

Teacher Empathy and Learning Success

The final theme from the literature to be addressed is the impact of teacher empathy on students' success at learning academic information or physical skills. Most of the research in this realm is qualitative, offering teacher and student voices concerning their perceptions of teacher empathy on student success. Teachers ranging from elementary and high school settings have posited that academic achievement occurred best in small groups where profound empathic behaviors are best displayed (Cooper, 2010). Similarly, middle school Latinx students and their teachers expressed confidence that authentically caring relationships strengthened student reading, writing, and overall academic confidence as well as instilling critical thinking skills that are necessary for future academic success (Newcomer, 2018).

Research also indicates that instructor empathy plays a significant role in helping students acquire practical skills, as evidenced by the impact of coaching empathy on the success of a student taking swimming lessons (Lémonie et al., 2016). In a somewhat ironic twist, nursing students' perceptions of their own capacities to exercise empathy were affected by their experiences—positive and negative—of empathy from their instructors (Mikkonen et al., 2015). Quantitative data on learning success is limited and conflicting, with Bostic (2014) finding no connection between teacher empathy and standardized test performance for eighth and ninth grade students while Lammers et al. (2017) identified a significantly positive connection between teacher-student rapport—a key component of empathy—and end-of-course grades for undergraduate college students. Bostic (2014) suggested the results of his study were due to the

limited scope of standardized tests that are designed to measure specific content rather than holistic student development and comprehension.

Summary

Although far from exhaustive, this review has revealed gaps in the literature about teacher empathy that warranted the current study. The first gap identified through this review is that middle school student voices about teacher empathy are seldom expressed, thus excluding a key component to understanding the full impact of the phenomenon. Eccles (1999) said, “a central task of adolescence is to develop a sense of oneself as an autonomous individual” (p. 37), yet the authoritative structure of most junior high and middle schools limits the capacity of students to express their growing abstract-thinking abilities. Soliciting student voices, wherein students contribute views on school or classroom experiences with the goal of advancing improvement in education practice or policy, can alter the authoritative trajectory by changing the student role from passive to agentive (Conner, 2015). Teachers who intentionally solicit student perspectives, thoughts, and feelings contribute significantly to developing adolescent autonomy (Alley, 2019). As co-researchers, young adolescent students offer perspectives that are unique from those of adults permitting access to differences not accessible without student engagement (Fielding, 2010). In student-centered pedagogy, “if we manage to create conditions of dialogue, then reciprocal engagement with those perspectives may, at least on some occasions, turn out to be mutually enlightening and productive” (Fielding, 2010, p. 63).

Of the qualitative studies cited, however, only five presented perspectives solely from middle school students—Kiefer et al. (2015), Kiefer et al. (2014), Newcomer (2018), O’Connell Schmakel (2008), and Smart (2014). Only Newcomer’s (2018) study was specific to teacher empathy; the other four peripherally included teacher empathy as a component of student

motivation. The remaining qualitative studies and the overwhelming majority of the quantitative research focused on the perspectives and practices of adults and older students, which is understandable given the complex nature of the topic. However, considering that young adolescent students are developing the capacity to understand and communicate abstract concepts (Eccles, 1999; Powell, 2015), the current study was necessary to explore their perspectives about descriptions of, the need for, and the impact of teacher empathy. This research adds to the literature on adolescent development and helps clarify the definition of empathy within the field of education.

In addition, none of the studies specific to teacher empathy were conducted in the private pre-college sphere. While this is understandable given the preponderance of public and charter educational institutions, it is significant that 28% of the elementary, middle, and secondary schools in the United States were private as of 2015, serving approximately 4,800,000 (nearly 10%) of the nation's students (Ee et al., 2018). Those populations provide researchers with a sizeable sample from which to glean valuable information on at least two fronts. First, as previously mentioned, anecdotal evidence suggests that empathy is best exercised and observed in small group or small classroom settings (Cooper, 2010). Research in private-school environments, which normally have lower student-to-teacher ratios, could prove significant in validating that proposition and establishing a baseline measure of practice and effectiveness for small populations. Secondly, considering that 75% of the private schools in the nation identify as Christian schools (Ee et al., 2018), this study regarding teacher empathy in schools operating from a biblical foundation that stresses empathic behavior should be beneficial to inform pedagogical and professional development decisions by Christian school administrators.

This chapter has established a solid foundation within seminal documents surrounding theories of self, humanism, and humanistic student-centered education in addition to recent, relevant research concerning teacher empathy. The research highlights the complex affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of empathy and its value in classroom settings when expressed by teachers. Specifically, quantitative and qualitative data showed teacher empathy is an important feature for meaningful relationships between teachers, students, and families of students. These relationships lead to positive impacts on student motivation, learning success, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Research specific to teacher empathy, however, has concentrated on teachers and older students; lived experiences of middle school students were limited to conversations about other topics that peripherally included teacher empathy. Additionally, no research concerning teacher empathy was conducted in private, Christian academies. The clear implication is there was a need to gather young adolescents' voices in Christian academies in a way that captures the essence of teacher empathy.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

To provide specificity to the process of exploring middle school students' lived experiences of teacher empathy, this chapter begins with the rationale for the chosen research design followed by a discussion of the research setting and the participants. Examinations of the procedures that were followed, and the researcher's role are followed by in-depth explanations of data-collection and data-analysis methods. Trustworthiness, as evidenced by credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability precede the final section of the chapter, ethical considerations.

Design

In this study, I utilized a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological research design. A qualitative design was appropriate for this study because the intent of qualitative research is to study the meanings that individuals ascribe to social or human problems or phenomena such as empathy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although quantitative studies have been conducted to measure teacher empathy and/or its impacts (Okonofua et al., 2016; Torres et al., 2016; Whitford & Emerson, 2019), the personal interactions that drive student perceptions are difficult to capture through quantitative means (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More so than quantitative studies, a qualitative study is also intended to capture student experiences in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, a qualitative approach to experiences of teacher empathy allowed knowledge of the phenomenon to be co-constructed between theorists, the researcher, and the students (Sloan & Bowe, 2014), contributing rich data to clarify definitions and behaviors.

Sometimes described as a philosophy as well as a methodology (Padilla-Diaz, 2015), phenomenology was the appropriate qualitative approach for this study because my intent was to

determine what empathy meant to students who have experienced the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) posited the phenomenological approach is centered on leading a group of participants who have experienced the same phenomenon back to the experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions. From those individual descriptions, the researcher can craft a synthesized collection that captures the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). My goal with this study was to “reduce individual experiences with [empathy] to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75).

Because my intent, in Husserlian fashion (Moustakas, 1994), was to describe young adolescent experiences with teacher empathy rather than to interpret those experiences as advanced by Heidegger (Sloane & Bowe, 2014), I employed transcendental phenomenological methods for this study. The transcendental approach provides the path for the researcher to transcend or set aside personal judgments in order to hear and understand something or someone else (Moustakas, 1994). Ironically, this focus on stepping outside of one’s preconceived notions about a phenomenon in order to capture the participants’ thoughts and feelings is precisely the idea behind empathy. Although some scholars contend that transcendental phenomenology has accomplished its entire purpose once the essence has been identified (Sloan & Bowe, 2014), data from this study could be useful to inform educators on the accuracy and effectiveness of their empathic conceptions.

Research Questions

This study of teacher empathy, as a lived experience, and as voiced by middle school students in private, Christian academies, was guided by one central research question and four research subquestions.

Central Research Question (CRQ)

CRQ: What are the perceptions of teacher empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?

Research Subquestions (SQ)

SQ1: What are the perceptions of teacher cognitive empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?

SQ2: What are the perceptions of teacher affective empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?

SQ3: What are the perceptions of teacher behavioral empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?

SQ4: What are the perceptions of the impact of teacher empathy on student educational and life experiences as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?

Setting

Two sites were selected for this study. The first (pseudonym Midstate Christian Academy [MCA]) is a small private, Christian K-12 academy in a suburb of Montgomery, Alabama. I chose this school—my former place of employment—as the replacement for a similar, albeit larger, Christian academy to which I had gained previous access and IRB approval. A change of administrators prior to research commencement forced me to withdraw from that location and seek an alternative site; thankfully, MCA administrators enthusiastically welcomed me to their school. This site was purposely selected because of the aforementioned personal relationships and because of its distinct Christ-centered mission (G. Schultz, 2005; Van Brummelen, 2009), which allowed me to address one of the gaps in the literature. The middle school is comprised of approximately 100 sixth and seventh grade students, 90% of whom are White.

The second school (pseudonym Capital Christian Academy [CCA]) is also a private, Christian academy located in Montgomery, Alabama. This school was started less than 10 years ago with consulting assistance from the head of MCA, a relationship that was beneficial to securing access. As with MCA, CCA was selected because of its physical proximity and because of its overt Christian focus. In contrast to the predominately White, middle-class, co-ed population of MCA, the population of this school is smaller (approximately 90 students in grades six through eight) and completely comprised of Black male students in Grades 6–10. The racial, gender, and income profiles of the students in CCA enhanced the availability of diverse lived experiences for my study.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected through criterion-based, purposeful sampling to assemble groups of students who had experienced teacher empathy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Englander, 2012). Unlike quantitative research methodology (Warner, 2013), there is little guidance governing minimum sample sizes for qualitative research; scholars suggest the number depends on factors such as the richness of individual cases, researcher desires for comparison or contrast, and pragmatic restrictions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Working from a suggested range of three to 16 participants for phenomenological research (Robinson, 2014), I enlisted 10 students for this study. I recruited five students from CCA (all Black males) and five White students (three females, two males) from MCA. Furthermore, all participants were required to be current sixth, seventh, or eighth grade students who had experienced teacher empathy.

I first sought the input of school administrators whose length of tenure increased the likelihood of identifying students who had experienced teacher empathy. I received great assistance from the two school counselors to recommend participants based on the counselors'

experiences with the students. In each situation, only one student proved to be unavailable/unwilling to participate, but the counselors were quickly able to direct me to suitable replacements. I originally planned to conduct preliminary interviews with these students to verify administrator perceptions and to determine student willingness to participate; however, virtual learning environments resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to change to a simple email inquiry about teacher empathy as defined in Chapter One.

Procedures

After a successful proposal defense, approval from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was received for both the study in general (see Appendix A) and for the change of research sites (see Appendix B). Both heads of school were contacted, and they quickly provided their consent and directed me to points of contact for daily research coordination. The CCA middle school principal and the MCA middle school counselor, both of whom have been at their schools for several years, enthusiastically responded to my request for suggestions on students who had experienced teacher empathy. Potential participants and their parents were contacted via email to determine their eligibility and willingness to participate. After eligible students and their parents voiced their interest, parental consent (see Appendix C) and student assent (see Appendix D) letters were emailed. Upon receipt of signed consent and assent forms, students were contacted via email to schedule virtual interview times.

Conducted via the Zoom (2021) platform, interviews were video and audio recorded using a laptop computer. After all interviews were complete, three participants from each school were selected to participate in a focus group interview based on their levels of engagement and maturity during individual interviews. The focus group interview was also conducted virtually via the Zoom platform. Individual interview questions (see Appendix E) and focus group

questions (Appendix F) were used to guide discussions in a way that allowed follow-on questions or questions about emerging topics. The purpose of the focus group was to expand on topics covered in the individual interviews with the hope that multiple voices would generate more in-depth answers. I attempted to keep the focus group nondirective to encourage a variety of viewpoints on the topic (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), and I had success acting as a facilitator rather than an interviewer to encourage conversation between the participants (O.Nyumba et al., 2018). Finally, all 10 participants were invited to compose a letter to a hypothetical future middle school teacher that discussed their experiences of teacher empathy; seven of the participants submitted letters (see Appendices G–N for instructions and submitted letters).

The final step of data collection involved sending participants the portions of their interviews, focus group inputs, and teacher letters that I quoted as part of my analysis. This allowed participants to verify or clarify any information contained in the transcript and data analysis. NVivo software was used for initial interview transcriptions (QSR International, 2021); approximately 70% accurate, the software significantly reduced the time needed for manual transcription. In addition, NVivo was helpful for conducting word-frequency searches, and embedded categorization tools were useful to designate, rearrange, and merge information into themes.

The Researcher's Role

Because I developed questions and conducted interviews rather than relying on existing questionnaires, I filled the role of human instrument for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since I worked at MCA as the middle school assistant principal for more than 10 years prior to conducting the research, I was very familiar with the environment and with most of the participants. Therefore, I was very intentional to ensure those students that I no longer exercised

authority over them and that their contributions were confidential. My only connection with CCA was peripherally through the president of MCA. As previously disclosed, every aspect of my life is impacted by my Christian theistic worldview. Through the process of raising four children with my wife of more than 30 years, I developed strong opinions about a biblical, relational approach to adolescents that I applied to parenting, teaching, and school administration. Thus, it was important for me to take every step to reduce my bias, beginning with quality interviewing practices that ensured the students spoke more than I did (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Likewise, the process of bracketing myself, also known as epoché (Moustakas, 1994), was important.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study included individual interviews, a focus-group interview, and letters from students to future teachers. Although individual interviews are the primary means of collecting data in a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994), incorporating multiple sources of data allowed more avenues for participants to include nuanced details about their experiences. Using multiple sources also contributed to the validity of the study by corroborating varied inputs in order to verify that themes, as opposed to one-time occurrences, developed to inform the overall essence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A detailed description for each type of data-collection follows.

Individual Interviews

Aptly depicted as inter-views, meaning that knowledge is constructed by interaction between two people (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), interviews for this study were semi-structured in nature. A semi-structured interview may be further defined as an interview wherein the researcher follows a list of prepared questions but remains open to other lines of conversation

based on participant responses (Brown & Danaher, 2019). The primary goal of any interview, regardless of the qualitative methodology, is to obtain descriptions of the meanings of life experiences (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Characterized by key aspects such as being deliberately naïve, focused, and expressed in normal language (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), the semi-structured interview is particularly appropriate for a phenomenological effort. The following questions, informed in part by scholars and previous phenomenological studies, served as the basis from which I worked while remaining open to other routes as participants communicated their perspectives. These questions are also included in Appendix E.

1. Please introduce yourself to me. Include information about yourself like family (brothers, sisters, etc.), favorite activities, favorite school subjects, and other interesting information.
2. How long have you been at this school? If you have been at another school, please tell me a little about that school.
3. What effect do teachers have on how you feel when you are at school (CRQ)?
4. What incident or incidents connected to a teacher showing empathy (understanding and/or feeling the situation with you) stands out to you (Moustakas, 1994)? Please give as much detail as you feel comfortable providing. Remember that any names you provide will be changed in my report (CRQ).
5. Please describe how a teacher asked questions to help him or her understand you and your situation. How did that make you feel (SQ1)?
6. Please describe how a teacher listened to your explanation to help him/her understand you and your situation. How did that make you feel (SQ1; SQ3)?

7. Please describe how closely the teacher's emotions matched the emotions you were feeling (SQ2).
8. Please describe how a teacher's body language led you to believe they were feeling your same emotions. How did that make you feel (SQ2; SQ3)?
9. How did the experience (or experiences) of teacher empathy affect you at the time it happened (Moustakas, 1994) (SQ4)?
10. What feelings did the experience (or experiences) generate in you (Moustakas, 1994) (SQ4)?
11. How has the experience (or experiences) made a difference in your life (SQ4)?
12. How did the experience (or experiences) affect your relationship with the teacher(s) (SQ4)?
13. What else would you like to share about the importance of teacher empathy?

Questions 1 and 2 were designed to solicit background knowledge about the participants. Such background knowledge was needed to establish context that contributed to the structural narrative that described how the participants experienced teacher empathy. In addition, these questions were intended to establish a relaxed environment that facilitated rapport between the students and me (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Questions 3 and 4 were worded to inform my central research question, "What are the perceptions of teacher empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?" The general nature of the questions allowed students to open up about their experiences with minimal direction provided by the questioner, allowing the stories to flow more purely from student memories of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Fitting for this study, these questions

gave me opportunity to model empathy as I sought to understand student perspectives and possibly identify with emotions related to their memorable situations (Rogers, 1959).

Questions 5 and 6 were directly related to my first research subquestion, “How do middle school students in Christian academies describe their experience of cognitive empathy from their teachers?” Scholars have indicated that teacher capacity to understand student feelings or emotions (cognitive empathy) is important to student perceptions of empathy, asserting that the mind must be engaged to appreciate the worldview of others (Krznaric, 2015). This is naturally a key aspect of teachers’ abilities to know students’ minds, goals, and intentions (Swan & Riley, 2015). Research has indicated that empathic teachers are consistently regarded for their capacities to initiate appropriate questions and to practice active listening (Williams, 2011).

Question 6 also shed light on the third subquestion, “What are the perceptions of teacher behavioral empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies,” as did Question 8. Defined as action, either verbal or nonverbal, that demonstrates understanding of and emotional connection with the other person (Lam et al., 2011), behavioral empathy may include activities such as actively listening, verbally naming and expressing understanding of the emotion of the other person, or employing nonverbal measures like maintaining eye contact or sitting face-to-face with the other person (Trickey et al., 2016). Data has also indicated that one may exhibit emotion regulation behaviors such as comforting touches or hugs, expressing condolences, engaging in efforts to distract the one suffering, and displaying optimism (Stellar et al., 2019).

Questions 7 and 8 were directly related to my second research subquestion, “How do middle school students in Christian academies describe their experience of affective empathy from their teachers?” A widely-recognized aspect of empathic capacities, affective empathy

refers to the ability to experience the emotions of another person (van Zonneveld et al., 2017). A teacher's capacity to exhibit affective empathy has been shown to be a strong variable that correlates with student academic and affective outcomes (Torres et al., 2016); thus, it is important to unpack student experiences of this component. Assessed in conjunction with self-reporting, body language indicators such as facial changes and gestures have been shown to play a role in determining affective empathy (Zhou et al., 2019). In addition, affective empathy is only effective when it accurately reflects the emotions of the student (Eckland et al., 2019; Rogers, 1959; Swan & Riley, 2015).

Positive self-regard and an accurate perception of self is necessary to the development of a fully mature, fully functioning person (Rogers, 1959). That development, particularly in young adolescents, requires participants to be allowed to express inner feelings in an unhindered fashion to fully explore the essence of a phenomenon such as empathy (Bryant, 2020; Moustakas, 1994; Powell, 2015). Finally, research indicates that teacher empathy is a key component of positive teacher-student relationships that have broad implications for student success (Garcia-Moya et al., 2019). Hence, Questions 9–12 were designed to allow participants to explore their emotions and vocalize their perceptions of immediate as well as long-lasting impacts on their development in answer to my fourth research subquestion, “What are the perceptions of the impact of teacher empathy on student educational and life experiences as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?”

Focus Group Interview

A focus group occurs when a trained moderator conducts an interview that involves all the participants from one research site or multiple research sites under the assumption that the participants share similar characteristics germane to the research (Lavrakas, 2008). Because transcendental phenomenology seeks to gather multiple perspectives that may freely flow from conversations between participants, a focus group comprised of students from both schools was an effective means to collect data for this study. I convened a focus group of six participants, three selected from each school based on demonstrated maturity and levels of engagement during individual interviews. The group met for approximately one hour via the Zoom (2021) platform. The following questions, also included in Appendix F, were the foundation for focus group interaction.

1. What steps do teachers take to get to know you in and out of school? (SQ3)
2. How did the teacher's efforts to see things from your perspective help you better understand your situation? (SQ1; SQ3)
3. How do you know a teacher understands your feelings? (SQ1; SQ3)
4. In what ways did the teacher express emotions in response to your situation? (SQ2)
5. Is it more important for you that a teacher understand your situation or appear to feel the same emotions? Why? (SQ1; SQ2)
6. Describe the experience of teachers attempting to see situations from your perspective. (SQ1)
7. How did your specific experience affect your feelings toward the class (or classes) that teacher taught? (SQ4)
8. How did the experience affect how you see yourself? (SQ4)

9. How did the teacher's efforts help you better show empathy to others? (SQ4)

10. What do you most wish teachers understood about being your age?

Answers to Question 1 shed light on my third subquestion, "What are the perceptions of teacher behavioral empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?" Because middle school teachers are expected to provide holistic educational experiences (AMLE, 2010; Powell, 2015), they must recognize that myriad situations affect student wellbeing. Question 1 helped to identify how students see teacher efforts to make schools a place of belonging (Barron & Kinney, 2018) and improve overall student mental health by empathic perspective-taking (Mælan et al., 2019).

The intent of Questions 2 and 3 was to further determine student perceptions of cognitive empathy to answer the first research subquestion, "What are the perceptions of teacher cognitive empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?" Although empathy is typically considered an emotional characteristic (Zhou et al., 2019), most researchers agree that one must think about and understand another person's circumstance to adequately display affective empathy (Bryant, 2020). Although not perfectly attainable, a major goal of exhibiting empathy is to perceive another's thoughts and emotions as if one is the other person (Rogers, 1959). In addition, perspective-taking is consistently highlighted as a goal in definitions of empathy, especially in definitions of teacher empathy (Swan & Riley, 2015). Given the interrelated nature of empathic elements, these questions also informed the third subquestion, "What are the perceptions of teacher behavioral empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?" Answers to these questions highlighted teacher behaviors and attitudes that have been meaningful in achieving that goal from student perspectives.

The construction of Questions 4–6 was meant to inform Subquestions 1 and 2,

highlighting aspects of cognitive and affective empathy. Rogers (1959) linked perspective-taking with cognitive empathy, and subsequent research efforts have followed suit (Cuff et al., 2016); thus, student perceptions in response to Question 6 informed theory and practice regarding cognitive empathy. Because true empathic concern is directed toward alleviating another person's distress rather than one's own distress (Lishner et al., 2017) responses to Question 4 were important to determining whether students saw teacher emotions as truly altruistic. Answers to Question 5 provided insight into both cognitive and affective components.

Questions 7–9 were designed to address Subquestion 4, “What are the perceptions of the impact of teacher empathy on student educational and life experiences as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?” While the importance of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of empathy have been repeatedly confirmed, it was important to investigate the relative importance of each. Young adolescent students thrive best when they are known individually by their teachers (Barron & Kinney, 2018), and each student is responsive to expressions of care on an individual basis (Chapman, 2010). Additionally, one of the major goals of learner-centered education is that students begin to prize themselves so they can achieve their innate potential (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). It is also important for students to understand how experiences contribute to their perceptions of self during the years of young adolescence (AMLE, 2010; Rogers, 1959). Given that much learning occurs via observing the behavior of a model (Bandura, 2006), answers to these questions also provided insight into the importance students place on being the recipients of teacher empathy.

Finally, Question 10 was appropriate to close out the questioning process and provide a segue to the letter-writing exercise to be discussed next. In addition, student responses to this question informed the research focus on perspective-taking. Understanding these responses could

further enable educators to foster environments of trustworthiness as well as develop their capacities to engage in deeper empathic efforts (Mælan et al., 2019).

Letters to Hypothetical Teachers

Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that qualitative research and the means to collect qualitative data are constantly evolving. Providing a place of privacy not available in interviews or focus groups, letter-writing has been shown to be an effective outlet for students to authentically communicate what may be deeply personal perspectives (Gordon Ginzburg, 2019). In that vein, I asked the students to compose a letter to a hypothetical future teacher describing the impact that experiencing teacher empathy had on their life experiences. As directed by instructions included in Appendix G, they wrote a brief summary of one or two experiences of teacher empathy from any point in their school experiences (see Appendices H–N for the teacher letters). They then described the emotions—general feelings and emotions toward the teacher(s)—that they recalled from the experiences. Finally, the students wrote about the impact the experiences had on their school experience. This final method of data collection, like interviews and focus groups, was suitable for a phenomenological study because it captured individual lived experiences, leading to a better understanding of the essence of teacher empathy.

Data Analysis

The first step in data analysis for transcendental phenomenology is that of epoché—a word of Greek origin meaning doubt (Padilla-Diaz, 2015)—to set aside prejudgments by reviewing and acknowledging my current thoughts and feelings about the topic (Moustakas, 1994). I began this process—a continuous one that is not perfectly achievable (Moustakas, 1994)—by acknowledging assumptions and biases in previous sections of this report. The remaining steps of analysis aligned with Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Stevick-

Colaizzi-Keen model derived from separate studies by the namesakes but most succinctly outlined by Colaizzi (1978).

Colaizzi's (1978) original model of phenomenological analysis comprised seven steps preceded by the process of describing personal experiences with the phenomenon—described as familiarization or bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From there, the researcher begins analysis by transcribing participant responses and then identifying any statements deemed significant directly relating to the phenomenon. The third step involves formulating meanings by generally restating ideas gleaned from the significant statements, followed by the fourth step of clustering themes (Morrow et al., 2015; Moustakas, 1994). The fifth step of the process involves synthesizing the theme clusters and other meanings drawn out by the researcher into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978), a step modified by some to include the use of symbolic representations of the phenomenon as presented by participants (Edward & Welch, 2011). With a rigorous analysis of the exhaustive description, Colaizzi (1978) proposed that the phenomenologist identify a fundamental structure and essence of the phenomenon. To stay true to the purpose of phenomenology (to capture the lived experiences of participants), the final step of this model is to verify the fundamental structure with the participants. Moustakas (1994) condensed these steps and introduced the elements of textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon.

Although interpretations of Colaizzi's (1978) model assert that verbatim transcription is not absolutely necessary as long as the essence of their descriptions is captured (Edward & Welch, 2011), I aligned myself with Moustakas' (1994) approach of verbatim transcription, using NVivo (QSR International, 2021) software to transcribe audio data from individual interviews and the focus group interview. I transcribed the handwritten letters verbatim by

manually typing the contents into a searchable document. I then used NVivo to perform searches for terms from all sources that was helpful in the identification of themes. Member checking ensured accuracy of the transcriptions. Member checking is a way to boost trustworthiness and credibility of the results (Birt et al., 2016). To member check, I gave the participants a copy of their quotes that were going to be used in my dissertation for them to confirm accuracy.

From the detailed transcripts, I examined statements to identify those that were significant to the students' experience of teacher empathy (Moustakas, 1994). I accomplished this via horizontalization, wherein every description from every student gained from every piece of data was given equal weight. This unbiased approach assisted in fully describing the essence of the experience rather than providing interpretation, and it served to record all relevant statements for further phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). To accompany horizontalization, I incorporated memoing as prescribed by Creswell and Poth (2018), making margin notes on interview and focus group transcriptions as well as copies of the participant letters to teachers. In addition to notes about specific words and phrases, my memos included observations of participants' body language and tone of voice—albeit limited due to the limitations of the virtual platform—that helped build structural descriptions of the phenomenon.

Following multiple examinations of the data, from all relevant statements I listed the nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements, also known as invariant horizons or meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). This coding process resulted in multiple categories of information from verbatim statements and notes. The initial list of codes was modified several times until I was able to identify relationships between the meaning units and further reduce the data to five or six clusters or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further thematic analysis identified further

relationships between themes, necessitating movement and merging of codes until four major themes emerged.

After identifying the salient themes, the last step of phenomenological reduction was to synthesize the themes into textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Using verbatim depictions from the data, individual textural descriptions captured what happened, including thoughts and feelings, when the students experienced empathy from their teachers. In the imaginative variation step, I reflected on the textural descriptions to identify contexts and underlying themes to create individual structural descriptions that captured how feelings and thoughts of teacher empathy were enlivened (Moustakas, 1994). From composite textural descriptions and structural descriptions, the final step was to create a comprehensive textural-structural description that captured the universal essence of adolescent students experiencing teacher empathy. The findings that resulted from this analysis are presented in Chapter Four, while Chapter Five contains a detailed discussion about the essence of teacher empathy and resultant implications.

Trustworthiness

Critical to any qualitative research effort are evaluative steps designed to ensure careful design, sufficient data collection, and applicability of the study in the readers' settings (Gall, Gall, and Borg, 2015). As researchers established the legitimacy of qualitative methodology, evaluative terminology transitioned from the use of a strictly quantitative vocabulary to the development of alternative terms that were better fits for the qualitative arena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One example of this transition emphasizes the need to establish trustworthiness in a qualitative study rather than validation. Trustworthiness in this study involved elements of credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability. The following sections detail the steps taken in this study to address each aspect.

Credibility

Credibility is the equivalent of internal reliability in quantitative research and is concerned with whether the findings accurately represent and interpret information drawn from original participant inputs (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To accomplish credibility in my study, I presented my findings to the participants for member checks to ensure accuracy and/or identify missing data. Method triangulation was established by employing three methods of data collection, and I also triangulated the data by constantly checking all three sources (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Finally, I engaged a close associate with an education doctorate to conduct an external audit; although I was open to the possibility that they may refute my findings (Leung, 2015), they did not do so.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability, comparable to quantitative reliability, account for the consistency of the research in terms of the methodology and content (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Triangulation of data sources was helpful in establishing confirmability (Hadi & Closs, 2016) as was the member checking and external auditing mentioned before. I also maintained notes detailing each step of the research to establish a strong audit trail (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Transferability

Similar to quantitative generalizability, transferability refers to the level to which a reader determines whether the findings from a study may transfer into their setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The aforementioned audit trail will be useful to provide a reader with process orientation (Hadi & Closs, 2016). The most useful tool to accomplish transferability, however, is a thick, rich description of the participants and the research process in the final report (Korstjens &

Moser, 2018). Details about the setting, procedures, participants, and specifics outlined in subsequent chapters provide the rich description for this study.

Ethical Considerations

The first step in ensuring I conducted an ethical study was to secure IRB approval which assured that the overall design and plan accounted for major ethical concerns. I also assigned pseudonyms to both research sites and all participants to ensure confidentiality to the greatest possible extent. The aforementioned consent and assent forms included statements that the participants could exit the study at any time with no repercussions. Finally, all paper data were stored in a locked cabinet at my residence, and electronic data was stored in a password-protected external hard drive.

Summary

This chapter provided an in-depth description of the methods to conduct a transcendental phenomenological study of middle school students' lived experiences of teacher empathy. An explication of transcendental phenomenology provided a clear rationale for employing the methodology, purposeful sampling procedures identified applicable research locations and participants, and a detailed set of procedures to accomplish the study established a clear roadmap. Identification of potential researcher biases began the process of epoché that preceded data collection and continued into a data analysis process aligned with Moustakas (1994). Finally, elements of trustworthiness and ethical considerations ensured that I fully protected all participants and met the high expectations of a qualitative research effort.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Four is to present and analyze the data gathered while exploring middle school students' lived experiences of teacher empathy in Christian academies. A brief introduction of each participant establishes relational context for the study. Participant introductions are followed by the presentation of results delineated by four major themes and 15 associated subthemes. This section also incorporates discussion of analysis procedures such as coding, dissection of themes, and the synthesis of findings that culminates with the essence of the phenomenon. The final portion of the chapter compares the results with the research questions presented in earlier chapters. As is common in qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the results will be presented in narrative form supplemented by visual aids where appropriate.

Participants

With this study, I explored the lived experiences of teacher empathy of 10 middle school students from two private Christian academies in central Alabama—five from CCA and five from MCA. Each participant was in Grades 6–8 and was recommended by their school principal or counselor. Administrators from the two academies initiated contact with each participant to gauge willingness to participate, and participant responses to my subsequent emails confirmed their willingness. Each participant indicated that they had experienced teacher empathy according to the definition I provided in a screening document.

As illustrated in Table 1, all CCA participants were Black males—consistent with the overall school population that reflects the school mission to exclusively reach the city's Black male population. In contrast, although not reflective of the entire MCA demographic (85%

White), all the participants from that school were White as I strove to establish racial balance within my sample. Although a similar balanced gender perspective was initially preferred, I later determined that I did not want to cast the study entirely in the light of a “male school” compared to a “female school.” Thus, I asked the MCA counselor to assist with recruiting three female students and two male students.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	School	Grade	Focus Group Participant
Alex	Male	White	MCA	6	No
Aliko	Male	Black	CCA	8	Yes
Bruce	Male	White	MCA	8	No
Copper	Male	Black	CCA	8	No
Dixie	Female	White	MCA	8	Yes
Franklin	Male	Black	CCA	8	Yes
Hermione	Female	White	MCA	8	Yes
Layman	Male	Black	CCA	8	Yes
Luna	Female	White	MCA	7	Yes
Xavier	Male	Black	CCA	8	No

Although the research tasks interrupted their summer breaks, all the participants were very engaged and very respectful as they wrestled with the life-disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though the necessity to conduct all interviews virtually eliminated some scheduling complications, it also precluded the opportunity for richer observations—such as participant body language—that are afforded by in-person settings. Also, as might be

expected, older students exhibited greater understanding of the topic and tended to express their thoughts more coherently. In spite of those barriers, the following rich participant introductions and experiential descriptions—punctuated by their opinions about the ways teachers’ attitudes affect students’ attitudes toward school in general—provide precursors to subsequent conversations specific to the essence of teacher empathy.

Alex

Alex, the youngest participant, was 12 years old at the time of the study. Dressed in a t-shirt and a baseball cap and speaking with a noticeable Southern drawl, he introduced himself as one who enjoys a variety of sports and, not surprisingly for a young man in central Alabama, hunting and fishing. He is the middle of three boys in the family, all three of whom have attended MCA for several years. As a note of distinction about himself, Alex highlighted that he has 13 girl cousins and only one boy cousin, which led to humorous conversation about activities at family gatherings. His entire educational experience has been at MCA.

To establish a baseline for the general impact of teacher-student interactions, I asked all the participants to describe how teachers affect their attitude toward being at school. Alex focused on teacher mood and engagement as the determinants of his own attitude.

Some teachers, like teachers like Mrs. D. this year, she was like all . . . she was like happy every day. Always like would talk, not always quiet. So like it was fun sitting in the class. It never got boring really.

In contrast, Alex related a negative attitude on his part to teachers who were “quiet. Didn’t talk very much. Just sat there.”

Alex’s experience with teacher empathy was grounded in academic struggles, particularly in math. Rather than emphasizing a single event with one teacher, he spoke of several situations

over the course of his fourth and fifth grade years. In the course of normal teaching, these two teachers would notice Alex's struggle and implement various teaching strategies. They also implemented a number of cognitive, affective, and behavioral steps to enter his world, particularly in the realm of establishing connections as they were transparent about the experiences of people in their families.

Aliko

One of the oldest participants, Aliko contrasted Alex's casual demeanor and dress by wearing a sport coat and bow tie for our interview. Sitting very close to the camera and very attentive, he demonstrated a mature passion to be an impactful person even in choosing the name of a prominent Black Nigerian businessman for his pseudonym. More so than any other CCA student, Aliko was also insistent on using the term 'scholar' rather than 'student' in keeping with the pattern at the school. Aliko is the youngest of four in his family (three sisters), he enjoys staying physically active, and he stated that math is his favorite subject in school. Aliko has attended CCA one year, having previously attended a much larger public school in the same city.

In response to my query about the impact of the teacher on student attitudes toward schooling, Aliko highlighted a student-centered attitude as key to his enjoyment.

All the teachers at CCA . . . they will actually stop, make sure that we are on track, make sure that we got it and then continue. If we don't have it, they would ask a question about it, or they'll just randomly ask questions to make sure you have understanding.

Contrasting CCA with the public school he attended where only "one or two" teachers approached classes in this fashion, Aliko said, "To be honest with you, teachers really did help with wanting to go to [CCA]. That's a place where I could get a great education."

Like Alex, Aliko's recollection of teacher empathy was grounded in two academic struggles. He recounted instances of a teacher recognizing his individual difficulty as well as a teacher making adjustments to account for the dynamics of an entire class. Although he could not recall either teacher specifically stating their rationale for helping, Aliko made insightful assumptions about empathic influences such as previous life experiences or accounting for outside influences on student engagement.

Bruce

Like Alex, Bruce approached our interview in a casual manner wearing a t-shirt and a baseball cap. The oldest of three, Bruce has a brother and sister who also attend MCA. He pointed out that he plays football, baseball, and soccer for the school; at the time of the study he had already begun workouts—modified to account for COVID-19 restrictions—for football. Bruce has spent all his school years at MCA. Consistent with my previous knowledge and experience with Bruce, he was the least talkative of all the participants. He was not curt nor was he disrespectful, and his answers tended to be insightful; he just normally answered with few words.

Continuing the trend identified with previous participants, Bruce credited student-centered methodology as key to his school enjoyment. Bruce equated enjoyment with fun and variety:

So some teachers, they'll make school fun in ways. And like, they'll like do games, to learn stuff, and stuff like that. And some teachers we just got like learning out of textbooks and stuff. So I like I'll get happy to go to the classes where we have different ways of learning instead of just normal textbooks.

Bruce focused on an instance of teacher empathy during the fifth grade as truly significant, a situation that combined personal circumstances with academic turmoil. He described how a time of anxiety—rooted in not wanting to go to certain sports practices—led him to disengage academically near the end of the school day. Again, mirroring Alex’s situation, Bruce perceived empathy from his teacher when she established life connections and noticeably acted in a caring manner.

Copper

One of my earliest interviewees, Copper was very patient to work with me through the trial and error involved with refining interview questions. He pointed out that he is one of four siblings, all boys, and as one who enjoys gaming, reading (he became more animated when describing the *Jack and Annie* series and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*), and cooking. To alleviate what I perceived as nervousness on his part, I pursued a deeper connection by discussing my own interest in baking. Copper has been a part of CCA for 2 years, having spent previous years at public schools in another city in Alabama.

When considering the impact that teachers have on student attitudes toward being at school, Copper and I had to collaborate on a way to phrase the question that registered with an adolescent mind. I settled on, “Do some teachers make your day better when you’re at school, and are there some teachers who make your day worse when you’re at school?” Although he could not think of specific instances, he confidently asserted “only better really, not worse.”

Like other participants in the study, Copper recalled experiences of teacher empathy rooted in academic difficulties. He described his struggles with math and attempts by teachers at multiple schools to adjust teaching strategies. In a somewhat exasperated tone that pointed to the deep emotions he felt at the time, Copper struggled to pinpoint exact empathic behaviors except

to speak about how they recognized his struggle and did not ignore him. He pointed out differences between the teachers, perceiving that his teacher at CCA was more persistent than the teacher at his previous school in helping him understand. Even so, with a hint of frustration Copper explained that the CCA teacher later ignored requests for assistance, signaling to him that she had missed an opportunity to more completely display empathy.

Dixie

My interview with Dixie took place on what was a very busy day of tutoring and athletic workouts for her. She had forgotten about the interview, so the first part was disjointed as she gained her footing. A strong student who typically enrolls in advanced classes, she plays three sports at MCA and is the only child of two parents who are also only children. To relax, her primary hobby is riding horses. She has been at MCA for 5 years after previously attending a medium-sized public school in the area. The busy-ness in Dixie's schedule emerged as a topic throughout her individual interview and in her responses during the focus-group interview.

Dixie's answer provided an interesting twist to the question concerning teacher impact on student feelings about being at school. Rather than focusing on what a teacher can do to entertain her or make her day interesting, Dixie revealed her own empathic nature:

It really depends on like . . . when I walk in the classroom, I can tell, like, if the teacher had a hard day or like woke up and wasn't happy or came in late or she didn't get her stuff done. And that . . . it really affects my day 'cause I'll be like—I'm not worried about the teacher, but I'll just be like wondering what happened and just like reading her body language to see if it's like still bothering her.

She concluded this line of thought by asserting that her attitude "really depends on, like, what the teacher's feeling and, like, how they're reacting during certain situations."

Dixie detailed experiences with two MCA teachers who showed empathy. The first experience involved her previous math teacher who provided a listening ear and advice after Dixie performed poorly on a math test for her current teacher. This teacher established a relaxed atmosphere that helped her gain Dixie's perspective in an organic fashion before offering advice. Then, returning to the theme of busy-ness and stress, Dixie recounted another teacher's more discreet yet equally empathic response when Dixie arrived late for her class. Dixie described ways that the teacher made it evident that she recognized Dixie's stress and sought to alleviate her tension without arousing the attention of the entire class.

Franklin

Twelve-year-old Franklin—very excited to become 13 over the summer—was very engaged and enthusiastic throughout his interview. Second only to Hermione in terms of excitement and energy, very early in the course of the interview I decided to invite him to participate in our focus group. Franklin has two brothers and one sister, and he expressed a love for dance and music (country, rock, and R & B) in addition being parts of the track and football teams for CCA. Franklin is also a talented vocalist who has been chosen to lead his peers in singing during chapel services. After studying at another Montgomery, Alabama, Christian academy for several years, he has attended CCA the last 2 years.

Given his high level of energy and enthusiasm, it is not surprising that Franklin asserted that his assessment of a teacher's impact on his attitude was "all about their energy and how much they put into what they do." Like other participants, he also seeks variety:

If you give, like, if you make learning fun and make it interesting, I'll wanna be there all day long. But if it's, like, if it's, like, boring, and we're just doing work, work, work, work, work, it's not going to make me want to feel as educated as I want to be. Or

learning as much as you probably want me to be because it's not giving me no entertainment into what I thought it was going to be like.

Although Franklin is a talented performer, it was nervousness about a performance opportunity that presented a scenario for teacher empathy. A teacher noticed his anxiety after he was selected to lead morning “rituals,” and Franklin recalled her empathic means of discussing things with him. Establishing connections through her own life experiences, she calmly engaged Franklin in conversation that helped him see the situation more clearly.

Hermione

Hermione was also excited to be nearing her 13th birthday. She was by far the most animated of the 10 participants in this study and, like Franklin, was an immediate choice to be part of the focus group. She has a 2-year-old brother and expressed a wide variety of interests that include volleyball, Harry Potter (hence her pseudonym), and The Chronicles of Narnia. She hopes to one day combine her love of math, science, water, and animals to become a marine biologist. Hermione has been a student at MCA for 1½ years; she attended public schools and a Christian academy in Arkansas in the years prior.

When asked how teachers affect her attitude toward being at school, Hermione emphasized that “understanding” teachers have a positive impact on her feelings. Particularly when she has felt sad or frustrated, “they’ve helped me a lot and they’ve understood what I was going through.” She credited such approaches with helping her calm down, asserting that “they really helped me be a better student.”

Specific to teacher empathy, Hermione described two situations at MCA wherein teachers walked with her through trying circumstances. Following the death of her great grandmother over Thanksgiving break, two of her teachers were attentive to the change in her

demeanor when she returned and empathically intervened to gain her perspective, share her emotions, and alleviate her sadness. As the school year continued, the COVID-19 pandemic forced MCA students to remain in their homes to be taught virtually. Hermione described how the two teachers mentioned before as well as her math and science teachers engaged during and after online class sessions to ascertain her wellbeing.

Layman

Relaxed and very confident interacting with an adult, Layman was one of the most mature participants in this study. He exhibited a reflective and thoughtful demeanor throughout his interview, making him an obvious choice to also participate in the focus group. He did not elaborate on his home life other than to express that he is a lifetime resident of Montgomery, Alabama. Layman's primary nonacademic interests are acting, dancing, and singing. He has been a student at CCA for 3 years after attending a mix of public and private schools.

Given his ease of interaction with adults, it is not surprising that Layman emphasized a willingness to maturely engage with students as the primary factor affecting his attitude toward being at school. In addition to their teaching skill, Layman specified that "it's just their personality and just like—being like—they're the type to, like, you just want to be around. They gravitate people." As another indicator of his maturity, when asked if he had a negative impression of teachers who do not possess the desired characteristics, Layman replied, "initially yes, but then . . . I got to actually know and understand their way of teaching and things of that nature."

It was once again a teacher willing to treat an adolescent student like a young adult that formed the strongest memory of teacher empathy for Layman. He described a situation in which one teacher came to his defense when Layman faced an accusation from another teacher.

Layman recalled how the empathic teacher, rather than assuming the guilt of a young adolescent, capitalized on his previous relationship with Layman to calmly seek his perspective and involve Layman in decisions about the ultimate resolution of the situation.

Luna

Although one of the younger participants in the study, Luna displayed an exceptional degree of maturity and insight. Perhaps indicative of being the child of a college professor and a middle school science teacher, Luna was articulate in offering very thoughtful answers. She has three older brothers—one of whom is also an MCA student—and enjoys reading and volleyball. All seven of Luna's school years have been at MCA.

When asked how teachers affect her attitude about being at school, Luna highlighted teachers' attitudes toward the act of learning as the key ingredient. As she stated,

When teachers make it seem like sort of a chore to have to learn things, it doesn't make us seem more eager to learn and eager to be in school. When they have a positive attitude and a positive outlook on what's going on in the classroom, it always makes us feel more at ease.

In essence, a teacher who loves to learn passes on a love for learning that "always makes our school day feel a little better."

Like Layman, Luna recalled a conflict situation during which a teacher showed empathy; her conflict, however, was with a classmate rather than with a teacher. Luna freely admitted that she did not "get along" with a certain male student, and she realized that she struggled to perform well if she was seated next to him or was forced to partner with him in collaborative efforts. In response to her request to be separated from the young man, Luna recalled that the teachers

spoke rationally about not being able to always keep them separated yet offered to take temporary steps that would give Luna time to formulate her own solution to the conflict. Luna expressed appreciation for the patient way her teachers sought her perspective without demanding immediate answers.

Xavier

One of the oldest participants, Xavier exhibited a confident and appropriately relaxed demeanor. He did not divulge many personal details other than to express that he comes from a “big” family and that he enjoys football in addition to other sports. Xavier spent 3 years at CCA after prior years in a large public school. Although he is leaving CCA to attend a public high school in Montgomery, Alabama, Xavier was very complimentary of the teachers and environment at the academy. Although the very structured culture required significant adjustment by all new students, he expressed understanding that staff motives were pure and consistently student-centered.

Although not as talkative as other participants, Xavier’s answer concerning teacher impacts on his attitude toward school attendance was nonetheless insightful. He stated, “I feel like if I go to school with, like, such a bad attitude . . . if the teachers are being nice and supportive, my attitude will start to change during the day.” Not surprisingly, he also pointed out that negative teacher interactions can push a good start to the day in a negative direction.

Xavier’s recollection of an empathic teacher was unique because he spoke about a whole-class scenario without including an individual situation. As several new students adjusted to the school culture, Xavier remembered a teacher who recognized that some new students were struggling to adjust to the CCA environment. Making connections to his own life experiences

and seeking their input on several issues, this teacher entered the tumultuous world of the young men to play a part in relieving their anxiety.

Results

This section presents the results of a transcendental phenomenological study of perceptions of teacher empathy as expressed by middle school students in central Alabama Christian academies. Data used in the analysis came from individual interviews of participants, a focus group interview involving six of the participants, and a letter to a hypothetical middle school teacher penned by seven of the participants. Following Moustakas' (1994) recommendation, the identification of significant statements by each participant was the initial step in analysis, followed by open coding to develop themes for each participant. Individual themes were woven into participant descriptions, and further analysis of individual themes led to the development of major universal themes as a final step in data analysis. The somewhat limited vocabulary of adolescent participants did not always include neatly coded words (i.e., “felt better” or “felt different”); thus, themes were sometimes identified by phrases I created to capture the essence of the input. Those themes and associated sub-themes follow in narrative form.

Major Theme 1: Teacher Engagement

The first major theme that emerged from the data was teacher engagement. The theme encompassed ideas of being available, caring, and attentive, with teachers being aware of student lives to the extent of recognizing the need for empathic engagement. Present in every source of data, teacher engagement served as a foundation for empathic teacher interaction with students. For example, as Layman pointed out in his interview, his teacher knew him well enough to point out that “you’re not the type to be in trouble for something like this,” and Hermione’s letter

indicated that her teachers recognized a break from her normally happy demeanor. Intentional regard and adolescent development served as subthemes to this theme (see Table 2). The intentional regard subtheme included various thoughts about teacher efforts to get to know students, taking time out of the day to check on students or have personal conversations with students, and consistently acting in a caring way. The adolescent development subtheme included data stemming from teachers' grasp of adolescent development such as responding to academic challenges, respecting the increasing maturity of adolescents while acknowledging the associated turbulence, and establishing relationships that extend beyond the authoritative teacher-student structure.

Table 2

Major Theme 1: Teacher Engagement

Subtheme	Code
Intentional Regard	Attentive (16), caring (12)
Adolescent Development	Developmental complexities (21), deeper relationships (5)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

Intentional Regard

The concept of intentional teacher regard for student wellbeing constituted the first subtheme for the major theme of teacher engagement. With the exceptions of Alex and Xavier, all participants highlighted teacher attentiveness and caring as foundational to their experiences of teacher empathy. Across all data sources, six of the participants spoke specifically about the importance of teacher attentiveness, most of them mentioning typical beginning-of-the-year exercises. Aliko recalled a situation wherein the teacher solicited student goals, explaining to them that “if you want to do something, you have to write it down first.” Participants then

recounted how empathic teachers built upon those initial actions to maintain considerate attitudes. For instance, during the focus group Franklin stated,

Some teachers, some places will ask me to stay behind. You know, stay behind that— with that period. And they'll ask questions about me, you know, how . . . how's my lifestyle and how it is . . . me as a person. And they'll ask questions like those. And some teachers I actually know on a personal level. So, we get together, we do things to, you know, get to know each other more.

Describing similar steps during the focus group discussion, Luna said,

I've also seen teachers that . . . whenever we're, whenever we're done doing work or whenever there's free time, they'll try to talk to their students and try to get to know their students and connect with their students more.

Several participants echoed Luna's reference to time, on a number of occasions mentioning that teachers interrupted their schedules to be attentive prior to and during empathic instances. Speaking favorably about all his teachers at CCA during his interview, Aliko pointed out that, "They take their time . . . really making me want to do better. They take their time out showing me that." As she spoke during her interview and later in her letter about the trying circumstances surrounding COVID-19 lockdown requirements, Hermione noted that teachers would conduct regular online classes and then "always stay on late. And we were just talking, seeing how we were doing. And with Mrs. E., I did the Google Meet with her and we would stay on there for like 15 more minutes and just talk."

Teacher efforts to be attentive during the school year paid dividends during subsequent difficult situations as three of the students pointed out in interviews and letters. Bruce pointed out in his interview that his teacher knew him well enough to recognize that he would "start getting,

like not really wanting to do anything towards the end of school day” and empathically intervened. According to Hermione during her interview,

My great grandmother, Nanny, had died. It was very hard for my whole family. I was very close to her and it broke my heart that I had to say goodbye. When school was back in session, some of my teachers noticed I was not my normal self, and they asked what was wrong.

Finally, as Dixie indicated during her interview, her former math teacher was familiar with Dixie’s tendencies “and then she ended up like—I like candy, I like sweet things. So, she ended up letting me get a piece of candy from her [jar].”

In addition to recalling teacher attentiveness, eight of the 10 participants used the words care or caring to capture their memories about their experiences. Dixie was particularly expressive about the importance of care. As a focus group member, she stated, “I just saw that the teacher cared about me,” and later on described a teacher in these terms, “as I just went through the year and then she showed that she like cared about me like more than other teachers did.” In her individual interview, Dixie said, “I felt like they cared and they were just trying to make one of their students feel better and so that they could have a good day as well,” an attitude that was especially important from someone other than a family member or friend. During his interview Bruce remembered his teacher speaking in “a caring voice, a softer voice,” and Aliko expressed his appreciation for teachers who make note of individual student needs by stating during his interview, “I can tell that they actually care and they want to see the best for us. That we're not just another number or another child sitting in their classroom.”

During focus group discussions, Luna offered a perspective on the importance of care that emphasized students can easily tell when a teacher does not demonstrate care. “You can tell

. . . if they just kind of don't care about the situation. It's pretty obvious. It'll be pretty obvious in the way that they talk, in the way they look if they don't care." More pointedly, as alluded to in his introduction, Copper struggled to see care from a teacher when the school transitioned to virtual learning in response to COVID-19. Struggling to understand the math via traditional presentations, Copper asked her to make a video. Instead, as he stated during his interview, "She kept like typing, typing, like how to do it and I kept telling her . . . please make a video about it because I still don't understand." Even after the second request, the teacher did not make a video and Copper continued to struggle.

Adolescent Development

Adolescent development was the second subtheme to inform the major theme of teacher engagement. Nine of the 10 participants made reference to teachers who practiced empathy by recognizing adolescent developmental complexities and by acknowledging adolescent desires for deeper relationships. Seven of the 10 students highlighted their developing maturity, which included their academic development, as a key component for empathic teacher interaction. As previously highlighted in participant introductions, several students were appreciative of teachers who understand the need for variety and engagement as part of adolescent academic development. Although Copper struggled to perceive empathy on a continuing basis through academic struggles, in his letter he perceived teacher efforts as empathic when he expressed, "I felt happy when my teacher understood my learning difficulties. In return, she would know how to help me."

Several participants, especially the older students, cited the importance of teachers acknowledging and adjusting to the psychosocial challenges of adolescence. When asked during

the focus group interview what she wanted middle school teachers to most understand about their students, Luna was quite descriptive:

Teenagers are emotional disasters. We are so confused about literally everything.

Whether it's school related or not. And I sometimes wish that teachers would understand.

Please do not get frustrated if we are doing a bad job at explaining to you what's going on in our head, because half the time we don't know what's going on in our heads. We can't explain to you our thoughts when our thoughts are scattered all over the place. It's very . . . it's just as hard on us as it is on you. We don't know. We don't know why we did some of the things we did and we don't know what's going through our heads. We're still trying to figure that out ourselves.

Franklin added a similar sentiment at that time by stating, “they need to know how—how our minds work as being teenagers and—and we're like much younger than the teachers.” In her interview and during the focus group discussion, Dixie expounded on the stressors that young adolescents face. Pinpointing the extremely busy lives of student athletes and the pressure that social media exerts on teen self-esteem, she summarized with “we're a little stressed.”

While Luna appreciated teachers who were mindful of their youthful tendencies, she and others were equally impressed by teachers who treated them as young adults. As Luna communicated during her interview, her teacher took practical steps to resolve her conflict while “at the same time, like kind of letting me solve the situation myself. I was able to solve the situation . . . and now I have a better relationship with that student.” Xavier recalled during his interview that a teacher sought student opinions before making decisions about classroom setup, creating an environment where “everybody respected him as much as he respected us.” Layman noted during his interview that the empathic teacher in his circumstance “didn't seem

judgmental, like he—like it was apparent that he wanted to know what was going on” from Layman’s standpoint rather than simply adopting the other teacher’s stance, going so far as to “ask what I think should happen.”

As empathic teachers responded to their increasing maturity, some participants also highlighted that relationships with students developed—within appropriate bounds—beyond typical teacher-student structures. During individual interviews, Layman noted deeper relationships with teachers to whom he could emotionally connect, and Dixie relayed that “I always would like go in her [former math teacher] room, and sit on her sofa, if I had like any time, any free time. And she had no problem with it. And we would just talk.” Hermione described empathic teachers as “my friends, and I can come up—and I can come to them, and just tell them. It just makes me really happy to know that I have some friends like that.” In her letter she said these teachers “were just acting like real friends instead of teachers.”

Major Theme 2: Means of Empathy

The second major theme that emerged from all sources of data was means of empathy. Encompassing three subthemes of perspective sharing, establishing connections, and body language (see Table 3), this theme was referenced nearly 100 times in the course of individual interviews, the focus group discussion, and in student letters. The perspective sharing subtheme included data regarding the centrality of perspective sharing as well as questioning and listening techniques that resonated with the participants. Dovetailing with the cognitive focus of perspective sharing, the subtheme of establishing connections incorporated emotional and life connections that addressed affective components of teacher empathy. Behavioral aspects of teacher empathy were captured by participant recollections of tactile and non-tactile body language to form the third subtheme, body language. Of note, although the data in each subtheme

pointed to distinct cognitive, affective, and behavioral characteristics of empathy, the following narrative highlights the interconnectivity of the elements established in Chapter Two.

Table 3

Major Theme 2: Means of Empathy

Subtheme	Code
Perspective Sharing	Questioning (19), centrality (17), listening (14)
Establishing Connections	Emotional connections (13), life connections (10)
Body Language	Non-tactile (22), tactile (3)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

Perspective Sharing

By far the most prevalent topic regarding the means by which students experienced teacher empathy, every participant in the study shared memories about perspective sharing across all three data sources. Participants consistently referenced the term “understanding” in a way that aligned with Franklin’s concise definition to open his letter: “Teacher empathy is when a teacher works to deeply understand a personal situation from a student.” In addition to highlighting the centrality of this subtheme, participants described instances of direct and indirect questioning techniques as well as intentional listening practices that assured the students that teachers truly desired to comprehend student viewpoints.

Centrality. The centrality of perspective sharing to teacher empathy was evident in the comments of more than two-thirds of the participants. To close out his interview, Xavier asserted that “if you’re a teacher and you’re teaching, people will feel down or something. You should try your best to help them up or see the situation from their eyes,” and Luna recalled that “teachers have always took into account how you feel or how you think on the matter.” Especially in

disciplinary situations, Layman's focus group input suggested that empathic teachers did not presume to know the details of a situation or a student's thoughts; rather, such teachers sought an explanation from students before passing judgment. In his interview, Aliko highlighted the centrality of perspective sharing by turning the question, wondering which students will enthusiastically engage in classes where teachers do not seek student perspectives. Similarly, in response to a focus group question, Luna expressed that, just as a student can discern whether a teacher has garnered the student's perspective, students can also recognize if "they're not trying at all to understand." While being interviewed, Copper communicated that he was encouraged when he recalled teachers verbally expressing that they grasped his perspective, but he was equally as frustrated when immediately "instead of thinking my way they would do it their way—in a whole different other way for me." When asked to clarify, he confirmed that they did not speak back to him in a way that reflected their professed shared perspective.

Questioning. In response to various prompts, all 10 participants shared recollections of questions and questioning techniques that teachers employed to grasp student perspectives. The participants generally recalled that teachers asked direct questions. Aliko, who like others perceived teacher empathy in response to student academic struggles, pointed out during his interview that "they would ask us. They would ask us straight up, 'Is anybody struggling?'" Aliko appreciated that teachers asked follow-up questions in these situations, as did Alex. Alex's enthusiasm was tempered, however, indicating during his interview that there is a limit that teachers must recognize: "sometimes I'd get a little mad over questioning kind of. I was mad at that point . . . I was already mad because I didn't understand, and so it just overwhelmed me." Copper once again had mixed emotions, perceiving empathy when teachers directly asked what he did not understand, yet when asked about follow-up questions in his interview he stated

“that’s the only question they asked me on a problem, and that’s it . . . I think they just went on and went to the other person.”

Participants whose empathic experiences involved nonacademic situations also recalled direct and indirect or follow-on questions from their teachers. As Dixie communicated during her interview, her English teacher, responding to noticeable signs of anxiety, asked “are you OK? Are you feeling good?” As expressed during Hermione’s interview, when her English teacher noticed a change in her demeanor, she directly asked what was wrong, and as a follow-up question Hermione remembered “she asked what can she do to help.” As Hermione recounted her experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown in her letter, she described the teachers as “asking how I was holding up, if I needed some extra help with anything.” Xavier recalled that his teacher “asked us about our feelings and how he can help us through them,” and Layman’s letter described how his teacher “started to ask several questions about how I felt about the situation, what I think happened, what I think should happen, and etc.” Finally, in a vivid account of a teacher probing the situation with indirect questions, Franklin relayed the following as part of his interview:

So, a question I can remember—a question that she asked me—is how . . . what do I think a leader is. And I reply back to her. I say, “I think a leader is someone that helps another person go into the right direction.” And then she asked me, “How do you think you should—with me being in the front and me being the leader of these rituals—she asked me how do I think I should lead, and how do I think I should lead these people into the right direction.” And I replied back to her, “By doing the right things and by listening to what people have to say in order to be more involved and be more kind of . . . be more,

you know, people to lean on” and to, you know, ask me anything for questions or anything like that.

Listening. While most of the participants readily agreed that effective questioning is critical to perspective sharing, nine of the 10 equally emphasized the importance of listening. For instance, when commenting in his interview on the overall importance of teacher empathy, Aliko said that it “made me feel like, I would say, like they were paying attention. And they were actually listening to me. Understanding what I was coming from.” Aliko’s positive experience was countered by Copper’s obvious frustration in sensing that his teacher was not truly listening in the aforementioned scenario involving her refusal to create a video presentation of a math lesson.

When asked how they knew a teacher was actually listening to them, the participants characterized teacher practices in a variety of ways. Bruce, for instance, emphasized follow-on questions in his interview when he said, “Well, I would tell her something and then she’d tell me like—like she would ask, ‘why are you nervous about that?’” Luna noticed body language and questioning with this interview response: “I could tell from the way that they were looking at me in the way that they were, the way that they were asking questions as I was talking.” Correlating with his description of teacher questioning techniques, Franklin added during his interview,

I know how she listened to my answers because when she . . . she kept piggybacking on like the answers that I gave her. She asked another question kind of evolving to that answer, so like, I answer one thing . . . and the next question she’ll ask me it’ll kind of, you know, be evolving that answer is I just gave her.

As a part of individual interviews, other participants noted that teachers gave undivided attention as they listened. Hermione stated, “They weren’t saying a word. They were just listening to me

talk,” and Alex recalled his teachers focusing on his paper along with him to get to the root of his struggle. Recalling a poignant moment in his teacher encounter, Layman recognized his teacher’s determination to listen when he noted, “I do remember there was somebody—it was another student that needed him—and he like told them to wait while we were having a conversation.”

Establishing Connections

The second subtheme contributing to the major theme of means of empathy, the act of establishing connections was referenced more than 20 times in interviews, in the focus group discussion, and in letters. Such instances stood out to eight of the ten participants in the study. The references were almost evenly divided between recollections of teachers who entered students’ worlds via connections to their own life experiences and comments about teacher tendencies to feel the same emotions as the students.

Six of the 10 students spoke about empathic teachers using situations from their own lives to connect with students. Although he could not recall with certainty that his teacher relayed a specific instance, Aliko made an insightful assumption during his interview when he stated,

So like if a teacher—if a teacher struggled growing up, struggled with something, they would know or put . . . they’ll put themselves in your shoes because they’ve already been in that before. So maybe she could have struggled with the same thing as she was growing up, and her teacher could’ve helped her and explained it better like she explained it better with me.

In response to an interview question, Franklin recalled his teacher doing just that as “she was kind of relating back to her childhood,” and Xavier said his teacher “gave us like—probably—I’ll say life experiences . . . how he got through things, and he talked to us from our standpoint

and our age.” When describing her teachers’ reactions following the death of her great grandmother, Hermione wrote,

They had been in my spot and had experienced a death in their family as well. They told me that they too had been very close to a family member when it was time for them to go live with God.

In a slight twist to this aspect, some teachers related to their adolescent male students via the life experiences of their sons. Alex recalled during his interview that several of his teachers “told me they had kids that struggled, like their sons, how like sometimes I’d struggle in school. And they’ll always help me with things because they had to help their sons.” Similarly, in his interview and in his letter, Bruce expressed that “she could relate to me because her son had anxiety also, and that would make me feel better.”

Students also highlighted the affective dimension of empathy, as several of the participants engaged in deeper conversations about emotional connections. Some were able to pinpoint specific instances wherein the teachers appeared to assume the same emotions that the student was experiencing. For example, in his interview Franklin said, “I think her emotions . . . I could see that she was like, really, you know, more nervous for me because she could tell that something wasn’t right. Like, I was nervous, and I was scared about it.” As Hermione gave details to her teachers, she also sensed a change in their emotions. In her interview she stated, “I knew they felt like the same pain, or close to it. I could tell that they were really sad.” As she pointed out while being interviewed, Luna assumed her teachers shared her frustration “because if they didn’t—if they weren’t feeling frustrated, if they weren’t feeling anything about the situation, they didn’t care about the situation—they wouldn’t have probably tried to solve the situation.” She also remembered that “they were crossing their arms. I remember that they were

crossing their arms while looking at me. So, they were probably feeling a little frustrated as I was.”

Although specific instances of teachers sharing student emotions were somewhat scarce, it is worthwhile to note that, when specifically asked whether the sharing of emotions or the sharing of perspective was most important, nearly all of the focus group participants regarded the emotional aspect as more important than teacher understanding. Layman said,

I feel like it’s more important for the teacher to feel the same emotions, but it’s more common to understand. I feel like you can’t entirely understand every single aspect of a situation until you put yourself in that situation.

When asked why he felt understanding was more common than feeling, he answered, “Probably because it’s easier.” Hermione also preferred that the teacher share her emotions,

‘cause like, if you’re going through something really hard . . . it made me feel better that they even gone through that . . . or they just felt the same way I did and that really meant a lot to me.

Likewise, Aliko and Franklin believed emotional connections were foundational to understanding because, in Franklin’s words, in feeling “you completely know where that person is coming from.” Even in providing a dissenting voice, when Luna spoke of the importance of understanding, she underscored that feelings are important by stating,

I feel like it’s more important for the teachers to understand how you feel, because in a lot of situations . . . if the teacher understands how you feel about the situation without you having to necessarily explain to them how you feel, it kind of makes you feel better.

Body Language

The final subtheme undergirding the means of empathy major theme is body language. Supported by interview, focus group, and letter references from eight of the 10 participants, this subtheme offers student perspectives on the behavioral realm of teacher empathy. The overwhelming majority of the instances involved non-tactile behaviors such as facial expressions or voice inflections, and a small number of students included examples of tactile expressions in their accounts. Once again underscoring the close-knit relationships between the realms of empathy, examples of body language in this section will often be closely tied to teacher efforts to share perspective or establish emotional connections.

Of the eight students with significant memories of empathic body language, all mentioned examples of non-tactile behaviors. Most commonly mentioned were teacher facial expressions that communicated understanding, care, or concern. Describing his conversation with his teacher, Franklin “could tell by her face how she was looking she looked very into and focused on what we were talking about,” a point he repeated during the focus group discussion and in his letter to a teacher. When relating how he perceives that teachers understand his feelings, Aliko’s interview response was, “It’s really in the body language and the way they’re kinda showing their facial expressions.” During her interview and in her letter, Hermione offered a more specific example, saying “I noticed their smile sort of fading. They got like a real sad expression on their face.”

Like several others when interviewed, Alex perceived his teacher listening and understanding “if I can see like they’re looking, shaking their head—like really listening.” Dixie’s English teacher quietly communicated understanding when

she'd like, give me [my worksheet] last, but she would, like, whenever she was explaining it, she would look at me and like nod her head. . . . That was just like the little things that I notice. That made me feel better.

Dixie also mentioned that teachers would alter their tones of voice—sometimes even giggling—to communicate empathy, a point that Bruce validated by saying that his teacher used “a caring voice, a softer voice.” Layman distinguished between the two teachers involved in his conflict by explaining that the empathic teacher’s “tone was different, his facial expressions definitely different.” He later noted dedicated attention in the way that the teacher “made eye contact. He didn’t get really close, but he got face-to-face,” a technique that several participants mentioned.

Although many cultural norms and the potential for legal entanglements have necessitated strict boundaries on the use of teacher-to-student physical contact, the appropriate use of touch communicated empathy to two of the students in this study. When asked how his teacher had demonstrated care in the face of his anxiety, Bruce recalled in his interview and in his letter that “she would respond by putting her arm on my shoulder telling me everything would be okay.” Hermione also recalled an instance of tactile body language, writing in her letter the account of telling her teachers about the death of her great grandmother and stating, “When I was finished, they engulfed me in a big bear hug.”

Major Theme 3: Immediate Impact

The third major theme that emerged was immediate impact. Encompassing two subthemes of reduced stress and transformed disposition (see Table 4), this theme was referenced more than 40 times across every data source. The reduced stress subtheme included data that was clustered into codes titled relief, calm, and understanding the situation, while the subtheme of transformed disposition incorporated aspects of feeling better and happiness. Although

discussions of empathy in Chapters One and Two indicated that an empathizer can effectively take on the joy of another person's circumstances, the participants in this study focused only on difficult or trying life circumstances into which teachers injected themselves. Thus, the subthemes and codes within this major theme primarily highlight transitions from negative to positive emotional states.

Table 4

Major Theme 3: Immediate Impact

Subtheme	Code
Reduced Stress	Relief (9), calm (8), understanding the situation (4)
Transformed Disposition	Feeling better (14), happiness (7)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

Reduced Stress

Emerging from the perceptions of six of the 10 participants, the subtheme reduced stress reflected student use of terms such as relief, calm, and feeling less stress or weight as a result of better understanding their situations. When Bruce, for example, realized that his teacher understood his burden of anxiety based on her sons' experiences, his interview response confirmed that relief was the appropriate term to describe his immediate reaction. Given Dixie's focus group comments about wanting teachers to understand the level of stress most adolescents endure, it is not surprising that in her interview she asserted "it relieves me of a lot of stress just knowing that there's somebody besides like my parents or a friend . . . somebody that I can go to talk to about something." Luna was especially vocal about feeling relief as a result of teacher empathy, early in her interview expressing

When teachers make an effort to understand how students are feeling, it definitely makes us feel relieved in some way, and in any situation, it always makes us feel more at ease to know that they understand our thought process through any situation.

She later characterized herself as relieved in relation to a teacher's ability to understand the student's situation, expressing that "to know that they could understand what I was thinking without me having to put it into words made me feel a lot more at ease about the situation."

Finally, when the empathic teacher stepped into his conflict situation, Layman expressed during his interview that he felt "relieved because I knew that somebody was actually coming to talk instead of just . . . well not talk, but actually have a conversation with me."

Sometimes in association with describing relief, several participants referred to themselves as calm as a result of empathic teacher behavior. A sense of calm was so memorable to Hermione that she emphasized it in all three data sources, beginning with her interview where she recalled that her teachers "asked me what was wrong. I told them, and they really helped me to calm down," a point she later repeated with verbal emphasis by saying, "When they understood, I just felt like 'Okaaay.'" In the focus group, Hermione described how teacher calmness contributed to her ability to "reboot" and feel calmer, and in her teacher letter she added "controlled" to her description. In similar fashion, as Franklin's interview response indicated, the empathy that his teacher exhibited also resulted in immediate calm for him:

It helped me feel more calm, helped me feel less stressful, because I knew that someone that I know cares about me. I knew that someone actually knows what I'm going through. And I know that I can go talk to her whenever I need to. So, it made me feel more secure, more happy, and more calm.

A third way that teacher empathy reduced stress for these students was by helping the students better understand and think more clearly about their situations. As Franklin described the impact of his teacher's empathy in his interview,

It helped me completely understand the situation . . . She was telling me, you know, ways to, you know—she was just making me comfortable and telling me how to handle the situation. She was telling me not to overdo it and not to, not to stress myself over it.

Layman asserted during his interview, “I got a clearer understanding of where the other teacher was coming from. The [empathic] teacher came and explained both sides instead of just what I saw surface level.” Luna was able to more clearly think about her situation as well, painting a poignant mental picture when she wrote, “I felt as if a huge weight had been taken off my shoulders knowing that I would be able to solve this issue at my own pace.”

Transformed Disposition

Eight of the 10 participants described instances of positive emotional reactions to teacher empathy to form the subtheme transformed disposition. Participants used phrases such as feeling better and feeling different to comprise the code feeling better. When asked as part of his interview how teacher empathy affected him when it happened, Alex responded, “It like, made me feel better about things. Like, from there on, like, I knew I could get help from my teachers,” and in his letter he indicated that he felt like he could do the work. Similarly, Hermione pointed out, “It made me feel better that they had even gone through that sort of the same thing I have.” Bruce stated in his letter that his teacher “would make me feel better,” which he credited with being able to push through the rest of the school day. Unable to settle on a specific term, on multiple occasions during his interview Aliko described his feelings as “different. I can’t really explain what type of different. It would just make me feel different—different from what I had

experienced in the past.” Dixie also used a different descriptive phrase in response to an interview question, stating “It definitely lifted me up to know that here is somebody that’s gonna like try and make me feel better.”

In contrast to the vague nature of feeling better, several participants described themselves as happy after experiencing teacher empathy. Copper penned in his teacher letter, “I felt happy when my teacher understood my learning difficulties,” and during his interview Franklin expressed that “It made me feel way more happy than I was” and feeling “awesome.” Hermione’s interview responses revealed that teacher empathy was important to her happiness across two situations. First, they helped her “be happier” after feeling sad over the death of her great grandmother,

and then with the whole Coronavirus thing when they were checking in on me, it made me more happy knowing that they were taking time out of their day to see how I was doing and how my family was doing.

Major Theme 4: Long-Term Impact

The final major theme derived from interviews, focus group discussions, and letters to teachers was long-term impact. Comprised of three subthemes of academic motivation, self-assurance, and sense of wellbeing (see Table 5), this theme was referenced more than 60 times across every data source. The academic motivation subtheme included participant perceptions of the effect of teacher empathy on their approach to specific classes as well as on their general scholastic effort. Participant perceptions of the impact of teacher empathy on their own confidence, comfort levels, and courage formed the basis for the subtheme self-assurance. The final subtheme, sense of wellbeing, consists of participant inputs regarding the impact of teacher

empathy on their capacity to confide in teachers and trust that teachers place priority on student wellbeing.

Table 5

Major Theme 4: Long-Term Impact

Subtheme	Code
Academic Motivation	Specific classes (19), general scholastic effort (4)
Self-Assurance	Confident (12), comfortable (8), courageous (3)
Sense of Wellbeing	Trust (12), security (3)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

Academic Motivation

Nine of the 10 study participants indicated teacher empathy impacted their approach to specific classes and/or their general effort toward scholastic pursuits, leading to the formation of the subtheme academic motivation. References to their motivation in the classes taught by empathic teachers were naturally the most prevalent, as most of the nine students were reflecting on events from the previous school year. The following focus group quote from Luna captured the attitude of nearly all the students.

Whenever you know how a teacher feels like similar to you, it kind of makes you relate to them a little bit more. And it definitely, for me at least, makes me enjoy the teacher a lot more than I usually would. And so, whenever I'm in a classroom with a teacher, even if I'm not great at the subject, even if I'm in the room with the teacher that I really like and I like the teacher not but not necessarily a subject, it motivates me to try harder in that specific class. Because the teacher makes up 95% of the classroom atmosphere.

During her interview, Dixie voiced a similar and common refrain about how empathic teachers heighten student appreciation for a specific topic: “I like started liking the subject more and more, and then [it] ended up being one of my best classes.”

Xavier also highlighted an empathic teacher’s capacity to change student perceptions about a subject when he said during his interview, “I didn’t like science at first, but he made it fun to learn.” Aliko was even more descriptive in his interview about the transformation of his attitude toward class: “I always [approached] reading as ‘Oh my gosh, here we go again—about to be bored always, even I’ll fall asleep in that class.’ Now I sit through the whole class—attentive, paying attention, engaging in highly intelligent conversations.” Franklin’s interview response described his empathic teacher’s class as the highlight of his day, knowing exactly when it happens because “you just want to be excited to go to her class.” Conversely, the inconsistent ways that Copper experienced empathy left him somewhat ambivalent. He wrote, “I was motivated to do better because of the help I received and the compassion from my teachers,” yet when asked about his current attitude toward math, he responded, “It’s not going up. Like, I think it actually stayed at the same level, which is ‘mehh.’ Like, it’s okay.”

Although the recency of their experiences led most of the participants to focus on their attitudes toward specific classes, some articulated their perceptions of changes to their general scholastic approaches as a result of experiencing empathy from teachers. Hermione transparently wrote,

It made me feel good about myself being the “nerd” in every single class. They made me feel like I could do anything with the help of God and they made me want to perform better in the classroom. . . . When teachers give their students empathy, it helps them learn better, make better grades.

Bruce also noted in his letter that, in addition to his teacher's empathy helping him through specific moments in her class, it was also helpful in general terms: "With her helping me get over my anxiety, I was able to focus more on my school work." In Franklin's view expressed in his interview, teacher empathy "motivated me to keep pushing in school. And helped me to perform better in class."

Self-Assurance

The subtheme self-assurance was constructed from the perceptions of eight of the 10 participants whose terminology formed the codes confident, comfortable, and courageous. Seven of those participants indicated that experiencing teacher empathy helped them be more confident in a variety of situations. Franklin enthusiastically commented about the impact of teacher empathy on his role as a leader, saying in the focus group discussion that "it has made me feel more confident with myself" and continuing in his letter with "after me and my teacher had this conversation, it made me want to lead more and be at school a lot more." Several students recognized a boost in their academic confidence. For example, Alex wrote in his letter, "My teacher would boost me up which gave me confidence to be able to do good work." Similarly, for future difficult academic situations, Bruce recognized during his interview "that I can get through it, and I don't need to shut down," and in her interview Hermione credited her empathic teachers with greater personal effort that "is why I feel so confident in the classroom and out of the classroom."

After experiencing or witnessing teacher empathy, several of the focus group participants also grasped the importance of and felt more confident in being empathic themselves. In response to a question asking if they felt better at being empathic, Franklin quickly responded, "Oh, yes, it showed me that if teachers can understand how I feel, I think I should, I understand

how other people feel. And that just portrays showing love and kindness to others.” Dixie also replied without hesitation,

Yes, because I know when a teacher shows empathy to me, it makes me happier so that I see that, hey, this person is not feeling better. I want to figure out what’s wrong with them and try and make them feel better so that they can go do it to another person.

Layman also felt greater confidence at being empathic, although “not so much of how a teacher showed empathy to me, but to other students.” He went on to say, “I can see the correlation between someone caring and not caring. I wouldn’t want somebody to neglect me while I’m speaking, so I wouldn’t do that to another person.” Finally, describing teachers as role models, Luna posited “whenever a teacher shows empathy towards me, I think that made me feel a lot better about the situation and made me feel a lot calmer. So maybe I should try to do that to other people.”

In addition to growing in confidence, four of the students reported being more comfortable either in academic settings or in their relationships with teachers. As Xavier recounted during his interview the ways his teacher sought to make new students feel comfortable at CCA, he concluded “it made me feel more comfortable in situations that I knew I probably weren’t able to get through. So I just thought back on what he said and took it.” He later elaborated, “It made me express my feelings more because I was a quiet person, so it made me open up to the point where I could feel comfortable stating my feelings to other people.” In addition to growing in confidence as a leader, Franklin asserted during his interview that his teacher helped him be more comfortable in stressful situations and more comfortable in her class. Dixie connected teacher empathy to subsequent personal relationships with her teachers, declaring in her interview, “I feel more comfortable around them.” In the same vein, Hermione

wrote, “It made me comfortable with those teachers,” a comfort that expressed itself in situations where “I just kinda sit there and talk to them a few minutes before I have to go to class.”

To round out the self-assurance subtheme within long-term impact, two participants mentioned courage as a result of experiencing teacher empathy. In his letter, Alex penned that struggling students who witness or experience teacher empathy will “have more courage to ask for help.” In response to an interview question, Franklin also recognized a boost in courage as a result of empathy from his teacher, using a synonym as his descriptor:

So when we had the teacher empathy experience it just made me feel so much, so much . . . like it made me feel more brave. . . . And I’m just, I’m just more braver than I have ever been, you know.

Sense of Wellbeing

Comprised of inputs by nine of the 10 participants, sense of wellbeing was the final subtheme of the major theme long-term impact. Three of the nine provided inputs that indicated that they were more willing to approach their teachers or that they could count on their teachers to provide a secure, supportive environment. Layman built on his emphasis on mature relationships in his letter, encouraging future teachers to establish emotional connections with their students because “things like that make it easier to approach teachers, especially in hectic or weighed situations.” As alluded to earlier, Xavier perceived his empathic teacher as one whose primary goal was to make CCA a welcoming place to new students; as a result, in his interview Xavier said, “We can depend on him to help us out through things. He would probably be the main benefit of us staying at the school or actually liking it.” As expressed in her letter, Luna felt especially secure in her English classroom: “Because I knew that my English teacher was a

considerate person who understood the feelings of her students, I liked that teacher a lot more. I felt safe in her class.”

Seven participants asserted that they could trust teachers more after experiencing teacher empathy, characterized by inputs during four interviews. Aliko spoke of transitioning from a student who did not expect results when asking questions to one who could ask for help, trusting that teachers would acknowledge him and his needs. After Bruce’s teacher transparently connected with his anxiety by discussing her sons, he was able to press through the day because he knew she “was someone I could talk to and tell her about it.” Likewise, Franklin conveyed that he felt more likely to confide in his teachers, saying, “I’m very comfortable with Mrs. D.; I can go to her with anything.” Finally, Alex offered a perspective that truly exemplified a long-range impact. After speaking about an empathic experience from the fifth grade, Alex asserted, “When I go into a different grade, or like different classes and things, I trust my teachers and know hey, if I need help, I can just ask.”

Research Question Responses

Data collected personal interviews, a focus group interview, and student letters to hypothetical future middle school teachers were used to answer the central research question and four research subquestions.

Central Research Question

The central research question for this study was, “What are the perceptions of teacher empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?” Inputs from every data source indicated that these students perceived teacher empathy rooted in genuine relationships as pivotal to resolving challenging situations and to positive psychosocial development.

Data from personal interviews, focus group interviews, and student letters portrayed teacher engagement as a foundational precursor to empathic experience (Major Theme 1). Nearly all the participants recalled how empathic teachers had shown intentional regard by taking steps to know their students in such a way as to recognize changes in behavior or demeanor. For example, in the focus group Hermione asserted

I kind of always had a good relationship with teachers in the past. They've always just kind of talked to me, figured out what my strong subjects are and what I'm not quite as comprehensive in. I've always been the person to kind of talk to them before and after class, whether it's something I have a question on or sometimes before classes start at the beginning of the day.

Participant interview responses also highlighted the importance of teachers whose interaction with adolescent students reflected an understanding of adolescent development. Aliko, for instance, related to teachers who are “actually engaged in highly intelligent conversation,” and Xavier described a deep relationship with his teacher that felt “like he was an actually close person in my life that I've known since I was born. That's what it felt like.”

As opportunities arose for teachers to practice empathy, participants perceived that teachers expressed empathy in a variety of ways (Major Theme 2). Teacher efforts to capture and understand student perspectives in challenging circumstances were most frequently discussed, but those recollections were not far removed from ways that teachers used those perspectives to make deeper connections and engage in empathic behaviors. Luna concisely captured the interplay that the students perceived between the various means of teacher empathy, expressing in her interview:

I definitely think that they shared some of the emotions that I was feeling. And I could tell because of how they were responding and how they were intrigued at what I had to say. If they don't care or feel what I'm feeling, then they probably won't care enough to ask me questions and make the extra effort to try to understand what I'm thinking, if that makes sense.

Participants also perceived memorable short-term impacts as a result of experiencing teacher empathy (Major Theme 3). Because all the situations involved negative emotions on the part of the students, they recalled immediate positive emotional changes and lower levels of stress. In addition to feeling happier, a number of the participant accounts reflected Alex's interview response: "It made me feel better because I didn't feel like I was the only one that ever struggled with things." Luna's interview response once again provided a voice for others who experienced a palpable sense of calmness and greater clarity about their situations:

When a teacher acts calm about the situation and you can feel they understand the situation and that they're not rushing or panicking about the situation, it makes you feel calm. And whenever you are calming down and being able to take a breather and think about it for a moment, it gives you the chance to just think, "OK, this is the problem. This is what we need to do to solve the problem." And it gives you opportunity to just calmly try to resolve whatever the issue is whenever the teacher acts calm and makes you feel calm.

Finally, participants perceived that experiencing teacher empathy was instrumental to long-term effects (Major Theme 4), as Layman emphasized in his letter: "Although it doesn't seem like it makes a difference in the long term, in my experience it definitely sets a teacher apart from others." Most of the students credited their experiences with increased levels of

academic motivation in the empathic teachers' classes and in a general sense. Bruce echoed the sentiment of numerous participants during his interview when he said, "It made me want to go to her class." Participants also noted increased levels of wellbeing as they felt more trusting of, and more comfortable in the presence of, empathic teachers. In this vein, during her interview Dixie pointed out that teachers who engage with a student who is "feeling off" will "definitely help with mental health especially." Teacher empathy also affected student levels of self-assurance in future situations as expressed in words such as confident. In Franklin's interview words, "It gave me so much more confidence. Which that is what that school does. You walk out the door, you know, feeling like 'I'm ready to achieve to where I'm ready to do what I am here to do.'"

Research SQ1

The first research subquestion was, "What are the perceptions of teacher cognitive empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?" In conjunction with Subquestions 2 and 3, data related to this question highlighted the various means of empathy employed by teachers (Major Theme 2). As the preponderance of references in the perspective sharing subtheme indicated, the participants perceived teacher cognitive empathy to be a central aspect of the overall act of teacher empathy. In a quote from his letter that bears repeating, Franklin pinpointed the centrality of perspective sharing with this definition: "Teacher empathy is when a teacher works to deeply understand a personal situation from a student." Participants consistently expressed appreciation for their teachers' efforts to understand student points of view, particularly when grounded in knowledge of shifting adolescent academic and maturity levels (Major Theme 1). Although Copper was sometimes frustrated with teacher inconsistency, he perceived their efforts to understand his academic struggles to be important, and Layman was impressed that an empathic teacher pursued his side of the story during a conflict with another

teacher. In Luna's view on the centrality of perspective sharing expressed during the focus group interview, "If they make it clear that they understand that you can be affected by the situation, that your performance in class can be affected by the situation, it'll make it feel easier for us to resolve the situation."

The most commonly mentioned method by which teachers employed cognitive empathy was questioning. Participants typically recalled direct questions to begin conversations, questions such as "what do you not understand?" in academic struggles or "what's wrong?" in situations of emotional struggle. Even in seemingly normal academic situations, participants like Alex, Aliko, and Copper perceived teacher questions as cognitive empathic acts. Several of the students noted that initial teacher questions stemmed from student emotional states that noticeably diverged from the norm, highlighting the role of previously-established relationships (Major Theme 1). The tone of teacher questioning was also important, as Layman contrasted the approach of the two teachers in his circumstance: "It was like fire and ice, like, one was this way and one was the other way." Students like Dixie also cast teacher questioning as acts to gain understanding in order to make things better, expressing during her interview, "I knew they were trying to make me feel better and understand that 'hey, she's not feeling OK. I would love for her to be feeling better, so I'm going to do everything I can so that she can.'"

Participants also made note of persistence in teacher questioning as a factor in grasping student perspectives. Several recalled that teachers asked follow-up questions that indicated a desire to understand and formulate a plan—either pedagogical or psychosocial—to walk through situations with the students. As he portrayed during his interview, Copper was initially impacted by the way that teachers would "always come back around. And so they knew I needed help because I was still on the same problem when they came around." As previously noted, however,

he seldom perceived that they asked different, more helpful questions. Participants like Luna and Copper specified teacher questions that were meant to lead them to their own solutions. In a cautionary account, however, in his interview Alex communicated that too many questions led him to feel overwhelmed and frustrated.

The second method by which participants perceived teachers exercising cognitive empathy was listening. As Bruce bluntly stated as part of his interview in reaction to his experience of teacher empathy, “I felt like someone was actually listening to me.” In response to queries about ways they could tell empathic teachers were listening, most recalled various ways that teachers focused on the students rather than being distracted by peripheral events. Dixie and Hermione asserted that listening practices were grounded in teacher-student relationships that had been fostered in previous months and years (Major Theme 1). Hermione characterized the role of listening in cognitive teacher empathy thus: “A lot of the teachers are really good about listening to their students. I think that really helped them be able to understand what I was saying.”

Research SQ2

The second research subquestion for this study was, “What are the perceptions of teacher affective empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?” In general terms, several of the participants perceived affective teacher empathy as a very important means of empathy (Major Theme 2), but few of them could pinpoint specific examples in their experiences. As previously discussed, most of the focus group members believed that affective empathy is more important than cognitive empathy. Aliko clearly stated his preference when he said, “I would rather that a teacher feels my emotions ‘cause when she feels my emotions she’ll understand what I’m trying to get or what I’m struggling with.” Some of the focus group

members even characterized cognitive empathy as contingent on affective empathy, asserting that one cannot fully understand the situation of another person without feeling their emotions. Luna expressed the complicated relationship between the two elements when she said that she desired that a teacher understand her emotions.

Perhaps because, as Layman asserted, expressing cognitive empathy is easier, several participants could not recall specific instances of affective empathy when asked during individual interviews. Acknowledging the possibility that his teacher felt his emotions, when asked the specific question, Bruce replied, “I guess so because their son went through it, but I’m not really sure.” Similarly, Layman responded, “I don’t know. I feel like it’s possible, but I don’t want to make a guess.” Those examples stand in contrast to Franklin’s perception that his teacher felt his nervousness; likewise, Hermione’s teachers reflected her sadness at her great grandmother’s death, and Luna’s teacher appeared to share her consternation with her conflict situation. The ambiguous nature of student perceptions of affective empathy is best summed up in Aliko’s acknowledgement “I don’t think it happened” that he quickly followed with “they always stay positive. They always had optimistic attitudes or emotions unless you get flustered or something like that. But other than that, it’s always been optimistic.”

Research SQ3

The third research subquestion for this study was, “What are the perceptions of teacher behavioral empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?” As was the case with the first two subquestions, data collected from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and letters to teachers were used to answer this question and to build Major Theme 2 (Means of Empathy). Although not exclusively, a substantial portion of the participants’ inputs for this question related to the subtheme of body language. In several situations, participants

perceived behavioral empathy in the forms of facial expressions such as a saddened face or a smile. Bruce also mentioned a noticeable change to a softer and nicer voice on the part of his teacher. In addition to those non-tactile expressions of body language, in their letters Bruce and Hermione perceived instances of a gentle touch as empathic.

Further highlighting the interconnectivity of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral forms of teacher empathy, most of the behavioral expressions of empathy were physical manifestations of one of the other two forms. Layman described the mature, calm voice that his teacher used to ask questions, as did Luna. Dixie made special mention of the discreet behavior that her teacher exercised to ascertain her situation. Teacher behaviors associated with listening were memorable to a majority of the students, especially as they communicated that the students had their full attention. Aliko recalled that if “anyone asked a question I could tell [the teachers] were getting where we were coming from, and they would start shaking their head and they would start to think.” Dixie and Franklin perceived that their teachers were listening by virtue of nodded heads. Layman highlighted his teacher’s eye contact and the fact that the teacher refused to engage with another student until he had finished with Layman. Similarly, in her interview and in her letter, Hermione expressed the impact of her teacher remaining perfectly quiet and still.

Salient to the choice of Christian academies as the research sites for this study were student perceptions of teacher behaviors that are often associated with Christianity. Hermione was the only participant to speak about such behavior unprompted by an interview question. As she described her teachers’ behavior when she told them of her great grandmother’s death during her interview, she stated, “I told them what happened and asked her if they could just pray for us now. ‘Yes, Hermione, of course.’ They just, they understood.” There was a mixed reaction in

response to a question on this topic during the focus group discussion. Franklin's example was specific to his experience:

Yes. She used Christian conversation with me. She was saying like, "even though all the time is not going to be easy—it's not going to go the way you want it to go—at the end of the day, it's always going to be something that comes out of it. That's a blessing for you." And she was also saying that even when situations like this happen, you cannot stress because God never stressed about any of the situations that he's been through. He wants the same for us, to do and to follow his footsteps.

Also in response to a focus group question, Luna recalled references to Christian ethics, although her recollections were broad in nature:

A lot of the time teachers would often use, like they would often say something along the lines of you need to be patient, be kind, and keep your mind open to other people's ideas, because that's how God would want you to act on the situation. He wouldn't want you to just be rude, be rude and just selfish about everything, about every situation you're in. He would want you to be kind and understanding towards others.

In contrast, when prompted during the focus group interview, Layman could not remember specific spiritual or biblical references, stating "I don't think so, but it's possible. Maybe, but it wasn't like very prevalent where I were, where I would remember if there was." This sentiment was echoed by Dixie: "Well, I mean, I'm pretty sure I have but I don't really, really remember when."

Research SQ4

The final research subquestion for this study was, "What are the perceptions of the impact of teacher empathy on student educational and life experiences as voiced by middle

school students in Christian academies?” The data collected regarding this question were instrumental to constructing Major Themes 3 (Immediate Impact) and 4 (Long-Term Impact). Given the negative emotional states that most characterized the participants at the moments of experiencing teacher empathy, it was not surprising that most of the participants perceived immediate improvements in their dispositions. The most common terminology that students used to describe emotional changes was they felt better as a result of experiencing empathy; other phrases included feeling different or feeling happy. Dixie vocalized her perceptions during her interview by saying, “Knowing that they’re still going to try and make one of their many students feel—just put a smile on their face—that just makes me feel like, happy.” Participants like Alex, Aliko, and Copper, who perceived empathy when teachers took steps to help them academically, felt better about their short-term ability to do their class work while others like Franklin were happy that their personal situations were apt to improve.

The second immediate impact that participants perceived was a reduction in their stress levels characterized by images such as calmness, reduced stress, and less anxiety. Luna was particularly vocal during her interview about the way teacher empathy contributed to her capacity to view her situation calmly and achieve a solution to her conflict with a classmate, and Dixie credited teacher empathy with reducing the stress that was inherent in her very busy life. Hermione wrote, as she faced the stress of mourning, “Knowing that they had understood what I just told them, I felt calm and controlled. I was also able to get through the week,” and in the focus group she summarized by saying teacher actions “made me feel a lot calmer and get a hold on myself.”

In addition to the immediate impacts resulting from teacher empathy, the participants also perceived several long-term impacts (Major Theme 4). Most of the students perceived

improvements in their attitudes toward the classes taught by the teachers involved in their circumstances, often stating that those classes became their favorites. Luna perceived such an attitudinal change in addition to an improvement in achievement as she indicated in her letter: “My grade in her class quickly rose from a 93 to a 100. And by the end of the year, English had become my favorite subject and my best subject!” Copper also recalled a change of attitude, penning, “Now I know I could do better and I did do better.” Aliko, Franklin, and Hermione voiced that such changes also applied to general academic motivation and, in Hermione’s case, to out-of-classroom activities. As Luna summarized during the focus group interview, “Teachers this year especially have shaped a lot of the things that I like and a lot of my interests.”

The second long-term impact that participants perceived involved increased levels of self-assurance on several fronts, often spurred by feeling more comfortable in the presence of empathic teachers. Franklin, for instance, in his interview described himself as more confident and braver to lead his peers through morning rituals at CCA after the empathic engagement with his teacher, and during her interview Luna recalled feeling more confident in her capacity to resolve conflicts in the future. Alex wrote, “If she would have been mean about it, I probably would have thought I couldn’t do it and it was just too hard.” Instead, he persisted with the work confident he would be successful. As a result of being the recipients of teacher empathy, several of the focus group members also felt confident that they would in turn be able to show empathy to others.

Finally, participants perceived a long-term sense of wellbeing in their schools as a result of receiving empathy from teachers, most commonly expressed in terms of trusting—being able to confide in—and feeling secure with their teachers. Expressing the feelings of several other participants, Alex said during his interview, “I felt like I could trust them more,” and he

expressed that if students receive empathy “they will like school better, and they will come to the teacher when they need something or don’t understand.” Luna perceived herself to be safe in the classroom of an empathic teacher, and she saw herself in a transformed way: “Whenever I experience teacher empathy, it makes me think of myself as a way more calm and less anxious person.” Xavier wrapped up the lifelong impact of teacher empathy to end his interview:

I would like to say, if you’re a teacher and you’re teaching, people will feel down or something. You should try your best to help them up or see the situation from their eyes . . . because you might not know how you can affect their lives.

Summary

Chapter Four provided the findings of the research in this transcendental phenomenological study. The chapter began with detailed descriptions of each of the 10 participants, all middle school students in Grades 6–8 at two schools in central Alabama. The focus of the study was to understand the perceptions of teacher empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies. Data analysis followed Moustakas’s (1994) recommendations for phenomenological data analysis, which began by identifying more than 150 significant statements from 10 individual interviews, a focus group interview involving six of the participants, and letters to hypothetical future teachers penned by seven of the participants. This was followed by open coding to develop themes for each participant that were included as part of the participant descriptions. As the final step in data analysis, four major universal themes emerged from the individual themes: Teacher Engagement, Means of Empathy, Immediate Impact, and Long-Range Impact. Each of the major themes was discussed in the results section, followed by a discussion of answers to the central research question and four research subquestions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experience of teacher empathy for middle school students at two Christian academies in central Alabama. Following a summary of the study's findings, which includes a review of the answers to the central research question and research subquestions, the study findings are presented in relationship to the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Next, the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study are presented followed by a brief description of the study delimitations and limitations. Recommendations for future research are then presented, and a summary section that highlights relevant implications draws the study to a close.

Summary of Findings

The data sources for this study consisted of individual interviews with each of the 10 participants, a focus group interview with six of the participants, and a letter to a hypothetical future middle school teacher. Individual interviews were the primary source of data; all were conducted virtually with video and audio recordings. Three focus group participants from each school were selected based on their levels of engagement and maturity displayed during the individual interviews. The focus group questions were designed to delve deeper into concepts that were covered in the individual interviews. All the participants were invited to engage in the letter-writing exercise; seven participants submitted letters that described empathic experiences and expounded on the impacts of those experiences. Open coding of data from all sources occurred after all the data were collected, with individual themes being collated into four major

themes: (a) teacher engagement, (b) means of empathy, (c) immediate impact, and (d) long-range impact.

The central research question was used to explore the lived experiences of teacher empathy as voiced by 10 middle school students in two Christian academies in Alabama. In response, participants emphasized that teachers who had habitually engaged with students relationally were well-positioned to act empathically with students (Major Theme 1). Such teachers exhibited care in ways that acknowledged adolescent psychosocial development and needs. A large portion of the data from all sources also indicated that students perceived teacher empathy through the lens of the means by which teachers expressed their empathy (Major Theme 2). Ranging from questioning techniques to a sympathetic hug, the participants offered perspectives that accounted for cognitive, affective, and behavioral empathy. Finally, participants communicated their perceptions of teacher empathy in terms of the personal impacts—immediate and long-term—of their experiences. Personal interviews, focus group interviews, and the letter-writing exercise detailed ways that the students recalled immediate relief from stress and improved dispositions (Major Theme 3). All three data sources also revealed participants traced long-term improvements in academic motivation, self-assurance, and their sense of wellbeing at school back to their empathic experiences (Major Theme 4).

The first research subquestion was designed to explore middle school students' perceptions of cognitive teacher empathy. These perspectives were captured by the subtheme of perspective sharing in the means of empathy major theme. The sheer number of references to teacher efforts to gain and understand student points of view indicated that participants considered this component of empathy to be especially memorable. Participants most distinctly recalled direct questioning from teachers as the primary means of sharing student perspectives,

particularly when asked in the context of mutual respect. In addition, the students perceived follow-on questions to be indicative of teacher desires to completely understand student situations as long as the teachers recognized and avoided the point at which questions became overwhelming. Finally, the majority of the participants perceived that active listening practiced in concert with appropriate questioning was important to perspective-sharing efforts. Teachers whose listening posture made it clear that the students had their entire attention were remembered to be particularly impactful.

The second research subquestion was designed to probe student perceptions of the affective means by which teachers were empathic, adding more data to the means of empathy major theme via the subtheme of establishing connections. Data in this subtheme indicated participants considered affective empathy as a very important yet inconsistently practiced component of general empathy. All but one of the focus group participants designated affective empathy as more important than, and in some cases foundational to, cognitive empathy. However, only a few of the participants could recall specific examples of teachers sharing student emotions like sadness, nervousness, or frustration. Because, as one student implied, affective empathy is more difficult to practice than cognitive empathy, most participants communicated only vague recollections of affective empathy or were not able to pinpoint specific emotional connections.

The intent of the third research subquestion was to round out student perceptions of means of empathy (Major Theme 2) by capturing student lived experiences of teacher behavioral empathy. Most perceptions of behavioral empathy centered on various types of body language, especially any gesture, posture, or facial expression that communicated undivided attention to the student and his or her situation. Although most occurrences were non-tactile, two participants

included instances of appropriate touches by teachers in their stories. Highlighting the intertwined relationship between the three components of empathy, most participants recounted examples of behavioral empathy as avenues to achieve cognitive empathy or to display affective empathy.

The fourth research subquestion was used to solicit student perspectives on the ways that experiencing teacher empathy affected their lives. Data from all sources revealed that students perceived immediate impacts (Major Theme 3) as well as effects that they believed carried into subsequent semesters and school years (Major Theme 4). Because most of the situations leading to the need for teacher empathy had produced stress or other negative emotions in the students, the majority of them recalled immediate profound positive changes that they expressed in terms of feeling better or feeling happier. They also noted experiencing lower levels of stress that allowed them to more clearly see their situations and, in some instances, formulate rational solutions. Regarding long-term impacts, participants most frequently perceived increased levels of academic motivation—not only in the classes taught by empathic teachers, but also in their overall academic pursuits. In addition, students credited their empathic encounters with helping them more confidently address similar situations in the future and more readily behave empathically toward others. Finally, participants expressed an enhanced sense of wellbeing at school grounded in trust that teachers prioritize student perspectives and interests.

Discussion

The findings from this study of the perceptions of teacher empathy as voiced by sixth through eighth grade students in Christian academies served to corroborate much of the literature presented in Chapter Two. Rogers' (1959) theory of self—comprised of his supporting theories of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships—was joined with theories of humanistic,

learner-centered pedagogy to form the theoretical framework of the study. Rogers' pioneering methods of client-centered psychotherapy broke from the norm of cold, clinical analysis and called for those in helping professions to make connections grounded in empathy for their clients. Rogers later applied his theories to education (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), becoming the latest in a line of theorists like Comenius (1896) to call for learner-centered practices grounded in empathic unconditional regard for students. A review of subsequent relevant qualitative and, to a lesser extent, quantitative research indicated that teacher empathy is an important component of humanistic, learner-centered pedagogy. The empirical literature suggested that such practices had significant impacts on teacher-student relationships that subsequently affected aspects such as student engagement, academic motivation, and learning success. As the following narrative highlights, data from the current study confirmed, and in some cases extended, findings from the theoretical and empirical literature base.

Theoretical Literature

As Rogers (1959) formulated his theory of the development of a fully-functioning person, he eventually articulated his theories of therapy and interpersonal relationships that served as part of the theoretical framework for this study. Asserting that a therapist's primary role is to help clients re-establish congruence and a healthy sense of self-worth, Rogers envisioned therapy built on relationships and believed that therapists must work to see the world based on their clients' experiences (do Socorro Dutra, 2016; Murphy & Joseph, 2019). Rogers (1959) further observed that therapists who prized the whole person and showed unconditional regard for client experiences were effective in achieving significant change. Such prizing leads the helper to see the client as a person rather than an object to be studied and paves the way for entering the world of the client (Eklund, 2006). Rogers (1959) stated it is at the point of entering the world of the

other person that the helper gains more realistic and accurate perceptions and thus employs better-informed helping behaviors. After witnessing the success of his principles in therapeutic scenarios, Rogers finally theorized that they would be equally effective in any helping situation such as teaching as well as in any interpersonal relationships.

Rogers' (1959) theories about the centrality of prizing and unconditional regard were clearly confirmed in this study, as the first major theme revealed that intentional regard and consistent relational care paved the way for teachers to later enter the worlds of their students and show empathy. Several of the students recalled that empathic teachers took steps beyond first-of-year ice breaker exercises to get to know their students. Franklin recalled being asked to stay behind after classes and being asked questions that allowed teachers to know "how's my lifestyle," clearly indicating to him that they cared about "me as a person." Hermione also had vivid memories of teachers remaining in classes to spend time with her to determine her strengths and interests, and Layman's previous relationship with his teacher made it possible for that teacher to know Layman was "not the type to be in trouble for something like this."

Several participants also emphasized that their teachers saw them as individuals and sought deeper connections, some in ways that extended Rogers' (1959) theory. Much as research had described, Aliko sensed that he was "not just another number or another child sitting in their classroom," and Hermione on multiple occasions expressed that she came to see her empathic teachers as her friends. Others, however, perceived individual attention by way of teachers acknowledging their increasing maturity as adolescents, thus extending the application of Rogers' ideas to a specific demographic. Aliko often spoke of teachers who engaged him in "highly intelligent conversations." Layman consistently referred to the ways his teacher treated him like a young adult. Although Luna wanted teachers to understand that "teenagers are

emotional disasters,” she felt bolstered that her teacher remained engaged with her situation while trusting that Luna was mature enough to resolve her conflict.

In the same way that Rogers (1959) theorized that grasping the perspective of the other person is the lynchpin to effective therapy and interpersonal relationships, every participant in this study spoke of the necessity of teachers attempting to see things through student lenses. Xavier experienced this with his teacher, and he encouraged other teachers to “try your best to help them up or see the situation from their eyes.” In Luna’s words, “When teachers make an effort to understand how students are feeling, it definitely makes us feel relieved . . . to know that they understand our thought process through any situation.” Layman once again gave voice to the adolescent distinctive when he recalled that the empathic teacher in his situation acquired and acted on Layman’s account of the situation over that of another teacher. All accounts of perspective sharing were not entirely positive, however, as Copper often questioned whether teachers truly grasped his perspective when he did not perceive changes in the ways they worked with him. His obvious frustration with these situations underscored Rogers’ (1959) assertion that better-informed helping behaviors are rooted in seeing experiences through the eyes of the one being helped.

Humanistic, learner-centered pedagogical theories formed the second portion of the theoretical framework for this study. Advocating a Christian humanistic approach that valued students as God’s image-bearers, Comenius (1896) was the first to vocalize a view of school as existing for students rather than the converse. Although his vocabulary was slightly different, he too called for prizing of the students, fostering mutual respect between teachers and students, and adapting pedagogy to student needs (Gutek, 2011). Comenius encouraged empathy as a catalyst to adjusting classroom activities such that students remained interested and engaged, empathy

that Herbart later asserted was essential to pedagogical love and the very basis of a teacher's success (Štěrbá, 2018). Rogers (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) emerged to again advocate for empathy, this time within school settings. He maintained his focus on the importance of prizing others, and he insisted that a learner-centered school cultivates a climate of trust and the capacity for students to prize themselves. As he did with therapists, Rogers asserted that teachers must learn to understand student reactions from the inside to facilitate significant learning, reduce stress, and help with overall mental health.

Nearly all the participants in this study described their lived experiences in terms that confirmed the theoretical foundation of humanistic learner-centered teaching approaches. Most spoke positively about teachers who created interactive, adaptive, and relational learning environments. Alex and Bruce enjoyed being in classes with teachers who enthusiastically engaged students with a variety of learning experiences. In line with Comenius' (1896) exhortation for teachers to keep school from becoming drudgery for the students, Luna bluntly stated, "When teachers make it seem like sort of a chore to have to learn things, it doesn't make us seem more eager to learn and eager to be in school." She went on to highlight the joy of learning in a class with an enthusiastic, engaging teacher. Although Franklin spoke of being entertained in class, the remainder of his comments about engaging classroom practices were in line with those from students like Aliko and Xavier which highlighted mature engagement that accounted for increasing adolescent maturity.

In addition to confirming theories about such interactive learning environments, data from this study indicated that the participants aligned with theorists' who placed high value on mutual trust and on the stress-relieving qualities of empathy. Student inputs pointed to an integrated view of trust, portraying it as both a necessity for, and as a by-product of, effective

teacher empathy. For instance, the patience that Luna's teacher exhibited communicated that she trusted Luna to be able to resolve her conflict in a logical fashion; Franklin felt the same trust from his teacher. Others, like Bruce, Alex, and Hermione, exhibited base levels of trust by communicating their concerns to their teachers. As trust paved the way to empathic encounters, several students identified increased trust as a long-term impact (Major Theme 4) from their experiences. Alex believed that his increased trust was not limited to teachers who had shown him empathy; he also expressed that he would immediately be more trusting of teachers in future grades. As Xavier recalled, his empathy-influenced classroom was a space where "everybody respected [the teacher] as much as he respected us." Reduced stress emerged as a short-term impact (Major Theme 3), and Dixie proved to be the most passionate about the topic. An extremely busy young lady, Dixie's primary request for teachers was that they recognize the stressful lives of young adolescents. Unsurprisingly, her most vivid memory of experiencing empathy from her English was the teacher's calm demeanor that led to an immediate reduction in stress for Dixie.

Finally, data from this study corroborated Rogers' (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) theory that teacher prizing of students would result in students prizing themselves, captured by the subtheme self-assurance as a long-term impact (Major Theme 4). Even though Copper struggled at times to feel that teachers were adjusting to his perspective, he felt that the empathy he did experience bolstered his academic confidence: "I know I could do better, and I did do better." Alex, Aliko, and Bruce conveyed similar sentiments regarding their academic confidence. On a broader scale, Franklin described himself as braver and more willing to lead his peers after his empathic experience, and Xavier credited his teacher's empathic guidance with helping him become more comfortable expressing his feelings and opinions. In a somewhat novel turn, teacher prizing

came full circle in this study when several students felt prized, began to prize themselves, and then determined that they were more capable of prizing others by being empathic themselves.

Empirical Literature

The empirical literature related to this study was grounded in multiple studies intended to codify definitions of the various dimensions of empathy. Rogers' (1975) foundational definition emphasized a non-judgmental effort to perceive another's internal frame of reference primarily by listening. Subsequent research (van Zonneveld et al., 2017) delineated between the capacity to emotionally experience another person's situation (affective empathy) and the capacity to understand a person's perspective (cognitive empathy). Behavioral empathy was characterized as actions taken to express either affective or cognitive empathy (Lam et al., 2011) that included eye contact, face-to-face interaction (Trickey et al., 2016), and emotion regulating acts such as hugs (Stellar et al., 2019). The importance of each facet was widely acknowledged, but cognitive empathy was deemed critical to empathic accuracy (Lishner et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2019) and a precondition for the other two components (Read, 2019). Although characterized as simple because one can imagine another's feelings (Lumma et al., 2019), scholars contended that cognitive empathy goes beyond understanding to grasping (Lam et al., 2011). Even though studies distinguished between affective, behavioral, and cognitive empathy, scholars nonetheless characterized all three as interrelated components of the larger phenomenon (Lishner et al., 2017). Germane to education, Swan and Riley's (2015) definition of teacher empathy emphasized cognitive and affective efforts to grasp student perspectives, intentions, and feelings, while Cooper (2010) described teacher empathy in terms of surface functional empathy, deeper fundamental empathy, and deeply relational profound empathy. Qualitative and mixed-methods studies also emphasized the role of care in teacher empathy (Bouton, 2016; Williams, 2011).

Data from the current study regarding the various elements of empathy largely aligned with previous research; however, there was some divergence. The participant descriptions of their empathic experiences included aspects of the various definitions in the literature, encompassing the affective, behavioral, and cognitive distinctions. For instance, Layman's recollection that his teacher was non-judgmental was in keeping with Rogers' (1975) definition, and there were numerous behavioral examples that matched previous research: Bruce's teacher placed her arm across his shoulders, Hermione's teachers hugged her, and participants mentioned instances of teachers maintaining eye contact or an intentional face-to-face posture. Most participants indicated changes to teacher facial expressions that indicated an effort to understand. Data also revealed teachers employed empathy along Cooper's (2010) spectrum. For instance, the scenarios involving Aliko and Copper, which appeared more surface or directed to a group, fit the description of functional empathy, whereas Hermione's teachers exhibited profound empathy by bonding to the point that she considered them friends. In varying degrees, the empathy shown by the remainder of the teachers was characterized by attentive behavior and positive communication, fitting squarely within the realm of fundamental empathy. Finally, participant accounts of teacher empathy confirmed earlier conclusions concerning the interrelated nature of affective empathy, behavioral empathy, and cognitive empathy. For example, most students recognized cognitive empathy in the form of teachers asking questions or various forms of body language. Hermione sensed affective empathy in her teachers' saddened faces, and Luna perceived her teacher's crossed arms indicated a sharing of frustration.

Summarized by Franklin's definition of empathy that described teachers seeking to deeply understand their students, cognitive empathy in the form of perspective sharing dominated conversations about means of empathy (Major Theme 2). More than 50 references

from all 10 participants might lead one to believe that the findings of this study confirmed previous research about the importance of cognitive empathy in relation to the other two facets. However, when asked directly about their preference, all but one of the focus group participants pointed to affective empathy over cognitive empathy. Franklin believed that sharing emotion with a student indicates that a teacher “completely know(s) where that person is coming from.” Hermione asserted that she felt better when a teacher felt the same way that she did. Layman seemed to agree with research in stating that cognitive empathy is more prevalent because it is easier, but he too felt a teacher cannot fully understand a student without feeling the student’s emotions. Even though she lent more importance to cognitive empathy than the others in the focus group, Luna still highlighted an affinity for the affective when she stated it is important for teachers to understand students’ feelings.

Similar to the theoretical opinions about the role of teacher-student relationships, findings from the empirical literature suggested empathy plays a significant role in maintaining effective connections. Adolescents have highlighted empathic teacher behaviors like warmth, concern about out-of-school activities, and personable attitudes in the classroom as instrumental in establishing close connections (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016). Other teen students also pinpointed conversations with teachers about student lives, interests, and goals, although rare, as desirable (McHugh et al., 2013). Results from Rodriguez et al. (2020) also indicated that empathic behavior from teachers fostered rapport that increased student acceptance of stronger relationships with adults. Results from the current study confirmed such findings, as exemplified by Franklin’s description of teachers engaging in conversations about his life out of school. Hermione perceived strong rapport from teachers who stayed after classes to converse with her, and Dixie’s teachers displayed warmth to an extent that she felt comfortable going to their rooms

for casual conversation. As previously discussed, all these efforts contributed to participants feeling comfortable in relationships with adults, expressed in terms of friendship, trust, comfort, and mature, intelligent conversation.

A review of the empirical literature also highlighted the role of teacher empathy in relation to academic motivation and learning success. Empathy has been cited as a supportive teacher behavior that young adolescent students described as critical to their motivation in the classroom (O'Connell Schmakel, 2008) as was lighthearted perspective-taking (Henry & Thorsen, 2019). In addition to previously-mentioned benefits, teacher efforts to learn about student life events through authentic listening boosted student engagement, sense of belonging, and academic motivation (Kiefer et al., 2015; Kiefer et al., 2014). Smart's (2014) study also suggested that empathic behaviors such as approachability, understanding, and helpfulness had a positive impact on student motivation. Although results have been mixed, data from some studies indicated learning success was also impacted by teacher empathy, with teachers and students in qualitative research reporting growth in reading, writing, and science courses (Newcomer, 2018; Smart, 2014). Quantitative data in another study connected empathic teacher-student rapport with improved scores on end-of-course exams for undergraduate students (Lammers et al., 2017). Participants in the current study also perceived that teacher empathy impacted their academic motivation, particularly in the classes taught by the empathic teachers. Despite the inconsistency in Copper's experiences, he specified, "I was motivated to do better because of the help I received and the compassion from my teachers." Bruce highlighted a greater desire to be in his teacher's class, and Franklin's motivation was also obvious: "I know exactly when we go to her class. I know exactly what happens and when it happens. And you just want to be excited to go to her class." Xavier and Aliko expressed that they shifted from

disliking science and reading, respectively, to looking forward to attending those classes. Luna was convinced that experiencing teacher empathy was pivotal in increasing her motivation to learn English such that her grade in the class increased by nearly 10% to become her highest average by the end of the term.

Finally, data in this study related to Christian school environments indicated agreement with findings from previous studies. Both schools operate as faith-oriented learning communities advancing a biblical worldview (Bankston, 2015; Linton, 2015; Roy, 2008). Other studies described teachers in such communities as nonauthoritarian and facilitative shepherds who seek to help students develop relationally, academically, and spiritually (Ognibene, 2015; G. Schultz, 2005; Van Brummelen, 2009). Although some Christian schools hire personnel specifically responsible for spiritual growth activities, Roy (2008) asserted that all teachers in these environments are called to be ministers at various times. Most student accounts during this study painted pictures of inclusive communities with attentive teachers who recognized the importance of holistic student development. The participants from CCA spoke regularly of daily rituals and being characterized as scholars rather than students, highlighting an intentional focus on community. Xavier spoke of his teacher recognizing the need to help new students acclimate to the rigors of the school, and Aliko commended such efforts as being critical to his desire to be a part of the school. The experiences of MCA students, highlighted by Dixie and Hermione spending extra time in teacher classrooms, also pointed to relationships that were continued from previous years. The apparent concern communicated by most teachers also indicated that they recognized their roles as shepherds and ministers. Of note, however, only a few students recalled teachers prayed or specifically referenced God as a part of their empathic experiences.

Implications

Previous research provided a strong foundation for understanding the phenomenon of empathy and its role in helping situations such as psychotherapy, medical care, and formal education. Theorists and empirical researchers have extensively examined affective, behavioral, and cognitive empathy in educational settings, determining teacher empathy significantly impacted aspects such as teacher-student relationships, student motivation, and academic success. The current study represents an effort to address two gaps in the literature base: (a) the lack of middle school student voices expressing their lived experiences of teacher empathy, and (b) the lack of research conducted in private, Christian academies. Expositions of the findings thus far have revealed several instances of corroboration with existing literature, some areas of divergence from existing literature, and some examples of extending existing literature. The following sections provide theoretical, empirical, and practical implications from this study that are meant to help stakeholders at strategic and operational levels infuse middle school cultures with teacher empathy.

Theoretical Implications

Rogers' (1959) theories of therapy and interpersonal relationships were ultimately underpinned by the phenomenon of empathy, but he presented his ideas in a way that suggested effective empathy is not a spontaneous event. Rather, he postulated that achieving the internal frame of reference of the other person is predicated on other relational steps wherein the helper prizes the individual as a person rather than an object (Eklund, 2006). Comenius' (1896) emphasis on mutual trust between the teacher and the student and Rogers' (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) later emphasis on facilitative classrooms further highlighted the centrality of such relationships. When asked to reflect on moments when they experienced empathy from a teacher,

most participants in this study were drawn to instances involving teachers with whom they had standing relationships. For instance, Dixie and Hermione had been taught by their empathic teachers for at least 2 years, and Franklin and Layman spoke of previous family or classroom associations with their empathic teachers as well. Although some of the teacher-student relationships like Bruce's and Alex's were semesters—rather than years—long, their descriptions pointed to intentional teacher interactions that laid a foundation for empathic moments. The implication is, although spontaneous empathy is not impossible nor is it discouraged, empathy in middle school settings where young adolescents seek autonomy yet crave security from adult relationships is most effective when employed in the context of established relationships. As such, decision-makers should explore strategic options that increase the length of time available for teachers to establish relationships. One such option is looping, wherein middle schools are structured in ways that teachers and young adolescents remain together for 2 or 3 years. While such a move might require large-scale restructuring for some schools, there are significant relational advantages that make consideration worthwhile (Thompson et al., 2009).

Another central tenet of Rogers' (1959) theories of therapy and interpersonal relationships as well as his educational theories (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) was that of prizing the individual. He worked from the supposition that a person's healthy conception of self depends on being prized, or treated with unconditional regard, by significant people (Rogers, 1959; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Incongruence in the individual's perceptions occurs in the absence of such regard; it is the job of the helper to nonjudgmentally (unconditionally) achieve the individual's perspective in hopes of re-establishing congruence. Comenius (1896) asserted as mankind is prized by God as the representation of God in the world, teachers must likewise prize

their students. Participants in this study gave a young adolescent voice to these theoretical stances, on numerous occasions portraying their teachers as nonjudgmental and patient with young adolescents dealing with incongruence. Layman spoke explicitly about the nonjudgmental approach his teacher used to resolve his conflict, and Luna was struck by how her teacher allowed her to communicate her perspective without interruption. Conversely, Copper struggled to feel prized when his teacher did not adjust her methodology to accommodate his struggle with virtual learning. The implication is current and aspiring middle school educators must grasp that young adolescents are simultaneously emotional disasters, as Luna expressed, and maturing young adults to whom nonjudgmental approaches are critical. Teacher preparation programs and local professional development experts can add student perceptions from this study to existing theoretical literature to help middle school teachers internalize the concept of prizing.

As previously noted, Rogers' (1959) theories were aimed at helping individuals re-establish congruence by means of empathic prizing. His discourse surrounding therapy depicted psychotherapy patients in states of significant incongruence who needed long-term solutions. In their tumultuous stage of life, young adolescents are beginning to grapple with issues of long-term developmental consequences while simultaneously being obsessed with immediate concerns like acne and clothing choices. These incongruences often disrupt their learning, requiring middle school teachers to aid with short-term solutions while maintaining long-term visions (Powell, 2015). In the current study, Luna's teacher recognized the conflict between Luna and her classmate was affecting Luna's attention in the classroom, and the teacher's empathic response helped provide immediate stress relief for Luna while also equipping Luna to logically resolve future conflicts. Other students recalled immediate benefits such as feeling better, feeling different, and feeling more confident to accomplish tasks at hand while also

crediting teacher empathy with long-term growth in trust, academic performance, and overall confidence. The theoretical implication of these findings is that the emotional complexities of adolescence magnify the need for teacher empathy to secure both immediate and long-term congruence.

Empirical Implications

The empirical literature surrounding empathy in general and teacher empathy specifically covered a broad spectrum of topics, ranging from definitions and scientific explications to the effects of empathy in the school building. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative research highlighted the benefits of teacher empathy primarily at the secondary and post-secondary level; largely missing, however, was the voice of middle school students detailing their lived experiences. Also absent from the literature was research specific to teacher empathy conducted in private, Christian academies. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experience of teacher empathy for middle school students at two Christian academies in central Alabama. Flowing from an emphasis on culture that emphasizes community characterized by empathic teacher approaches (Bankston, 2015; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Roy, 2008), findings from this study generated implications for stakeholders of private and public middle schools.

Data in the empirical literature base consistently indicated connections exist between empathic cultures and academic effectiveness. Parents have expressed a desire for challenging academic offerings presented in settings of close relationships, understanding, and empathy (Klassen et al., 2018; Linton, 2015), a sentiment echoed by students (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016) and reflected in the mission statements of the two schools in this study (CCA President, personal communication, February 10, 2021; MCA President, personal communication, February 10,

2021). Multiple studies have also connected such settings with enhanced student motivation (Kiefer et al., 2015; Kiefer et al., 2014; Raufelder et al., 2016) and with increases in academic scores (Newcomer, 2018).

True to Comenius' (1896) assertion that empathic teachers foster academic excitement in students, participants in this study affirmed greater degrees of academic motivation as a result of experiencing teacher empathy. Franklin spoke of eagerly anticipating his empathic teacher's class each day, and Aliko, Dixie, and Xavier spoke of shifting from dread of certain topics to genuine appreciation for them. Copper and Hermione recalled being motivated to work harder in their classes as a result of the attention they received from their teachers, while Luna credited her empathic English teacher with the motivation necessary to raise her English average above the rest of her classes. For stakeholders engaged in shaping cultures of academic excellence in public and private middle schools, the implication from these findings is the impact of empathic teacher interactions on academic performance should be part of the conversation. Along with traditional analyses of standardized testing results and presentations about research-based classroom innovations, professional development efforts should include discussions about this study and others that draw perspectives about academics directly from young adolescent students.

In addition to the empirical data surrounding the impact of teacher empathy on academic performance, there is also extensive research on the roles of the affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of teacher empathy. Research data showed each component is important for individuals to be effectively empathic and mature in prosocial behaviors (Lockwood et al., 2014), and various studies highlighted each component plays a part in educators making meaningful connections with students, demonstrating sensitivity, and demonstrating affirmation (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016; Linton, 2015; Roy, 2008). Research also highlighted the interrelated

nature of the three elements (Lishner et al., 2017). Affirming assertions about interrelatedness, all participant descriptions of behavioral empathy such as facial expressions, direct eye contact, and, in the cases of Bruce and Hermione, physical contact, were connected to either cognitive or affective empathy. Participants in this study conversed most frequently about cognitive empathy from their teachers, highlighting instances of perspective sharing via effective questioning and listening behaviors. However, underscoring empirical debate surrounding the relative importance of the affective and cognitive realms (Lam et al., 2011; Read, 2019), five of the six focus group members felt that affective empathy was more important but less frequently employed. Of the 10 participants, only Franklin, Hermione, and Luna explicitly perceived that their teachers shared their emotions.

The implication from these findings is, as a part of training regarding the practice of each type of empathy, stakeholders such as college professors and school decision-makers should emphasize a culture of affective transparency in middle school settings. Because teacher perspectives were not solicited for this study, one can only speculate as to why there were relatively few instances of obvious affective empathy. Such displays may not have been natural expressions of teacher temperaments, or teachers may have felt emotional expressions could be perceived as unprofessional by administrators. Perhaps, as implied by research (Lumma et al., 2019) and by Layman in this study, teachers regarded affective empathy as too difficult. Regardless of the rationale of the teachers, results from this study suggest that young adolescents value affective empathy. Thus, teacher training and professional development programs should include these results as a point of emphasis, and school boards and administrators should craft cultures in which middle school teachers feel free to—are even encouraged to—emotionally connect with their students in empathic exchanges.

The goal of many private, Christian academies is to provide challenging core academic instruction in a way that infuses graduates with a God-centered worldview to enable them to see their unique role in God's larger story (Bankston, 2015; deBoer & Cook, 2018; G. Schultz, 2005; Van Brummelen, 2009). Scholars have characterized teachers in Christian schools as pivotal to achieving spiritually-based goals, describing teachers as priests, shepherds, and stewards (Van Brummelen, 2009) and as having pastoral roles that complement those of campus ministers (Roy, 2008). All participant accounts in the current study portrayed teachers at both schools as taking the initiative to be shepherds and ministers who recognized academic and personal crises, often made connections via life experiences, and walked with students toward solutions. As the empathic point persons, teachers also fulfilled complementary pastoral roles for the campus minister at MCA and the cultural director at CCA.

Although teachers at the two Christian schools in this study engaged all the students empathically, only two of the participants spoke about teachers interacting with them through prayer, scriptural encouragement, or specific comments about God's role in their situations. Hermione stated her teachers willingly prayed for her, and Franklin's teacher spoke about God's expectations of him as a leader; the other participants recalled only vague references or no examples at all. As was the case with the lack of obvious affective empathy, there is no way to pinpoint the reasons that teachers did not include more ecumenical elements of Christianity in their empathic exchanges; possible reasons range from lack of experience in their personal lives to beliefs that such practices rest with campus ministers or Bible teachers. The implication, however, is middle school teachers in Christian academies may be failing to recognize the unique opportunities they have to overtly utilize powerful tools such as prayer and passages from the Bible while demonstrating empathy. Because a God-centered approach to life distinguishes

Christian humanistic pedagogy from secular humanistic methods (AHA, 2021; Howard & Packer, 1985; G. Schultz, 2005), decision-makers at Christian academies should emphasize the broadest possible application of ministry practices by all faculty members. Administrators could partner with local church ministers to help teachers confidently apply prayer and scripture to their own lives, supplemented by professional development events that provide practical assistance to help students recognize the contemporary relevance and power of the Bible and prayer.

Practical Implications

The foregoing discourses surrounding the theoretical and empirical implications of this study included possible steps for educational scholars and middle school decision-makers to better incorporate teacher empathy in classrooms for young adolescents. In addition to being applicable at the strategic level, some of those implications can be extended to the practical level for middle school teachers. For example, Rogers (1959) theorized empathy in psychotherapeutic situations is preceded by established relationships, a theory that later added to the foundation of humanistic, learner-centered educational practices (Comenius, 1896; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). While not eschewing spontaneous empathy altogether, scholars have suggested empathy is most effective in the context of relationships built over time.

The practical implication for teachers is the extended time with students during a school year provides teachers with outstanding opportunities to foster meaningful relationships that form the basis for empathic interactions. Thus, middle school teachers should implement measures throughout the school year to share themselves with their students (Williams, 2011) and to better enter students' worlds. For instance, as the participants in this study recalled, traditional ice-breaker activities at the beginning of the year establish a basis for getting to know

the students; teachers should also use those activities to begin telling their own stories, especially experiences from their middle school years. Teachers can also make themselves obviously available for casual conversation before and after class times, even to the point of allowing students to relax in their classrooms as Dixie and Hermione described. Teachers can also casually engage with students at the lunch table or be casual observers as students use classrooms as dining places (Daniels, 2011). Attendance at student extracurricular activities provides another excellent opportunity for teachers to observe multiple students simultaneously and establish a springboard for engagement with individuals. Lastly, teachers in looping environments or who teach classes in multiple grade levels should use the built-in advantages of those situations to foster relationships as described by participants like Dixie, Franklin, Hermione, and Layman.

Finally, data from the empirical base provided insight into the continuum of teacher empathy that can be worked out at the middle school classroom level. Cooper (2010) outlined a progression of teacher empathy beginning with functional, one-size-fits-all empathy meant to establish a surface baseline familiarity with an entire class. He proceeded to describe fundamental empathy in terms of interaction with individual students characterized by various behaviors to nonjudgmentally grasp student perspectives. The last stage of this continuum is profound empathy which results in deeper relationships as a result of teachers achieving higher levels of care, concern, and understanding. Participants in the current study described empathic experiences that fit within each step of Cooper's (2010) continuum. Nearly all the focus group members referenced first-of-year ice breaker activities that are characteristic of functional empathy, and Xavier's description of how his teacher engaged the entire class to determine their perspectives on classroom arrangement is a classic fit. Although not fitting neatly within the

definition, seemingly normal teacher actions like assessing academic struggles were perceived as empathic by Alex, Aliko, and Copper and could be considered as functional empathy. The majority of the students described instances of fundamental empathy by teachers who persistently sought perspectives from individuals in various stages of incongruence. Profound empathy was best captured by Hermione, whose teachers exhibited such high levels of understanding and concern that she described her relationship with them as friends rather than just teachers.

The practical implication for teachers is young adolescent students value each level of teacher empathy, and an understanding of the various stages can assist teachers with empathic growth. Although empathy is not a formulaic exercise, teachers can use Cooper's (2010) model to develop plans to implement empathic practices and grow in their capacities to be empathic. Teachers can approach efforts to address academic struggles as functional empathic steps that may generate opportunities to open windows into student worlds. As Copper's case illustrated, teachers must be persistent and adjust to unambiguously communicate empathy in these situations. Teachers may then capitalize on growing relationships to practice nonjudgmental perspective assessment, active questioning and listening skills, and making life connections during routine school activities. Thus, preparing themselves for moments when students directly approach them or when they recognize demeanor changes in students, teachers will be prepared to exercise fundamental empathy that helps young adolescents navigate their often-tumultuous circumstances. Practicing fundamental empathy may well be the best preparation for exhibiting profound empathy according to Cooper (2010), who characterized teachers bonding with students during this stage, perhaps, as was the case with Hermione, even being seen as friends.

Teachers who desire to reach this stage of empathy may also prepare by consciously discovering the *why* rather than just the *what* in young adolescent behaviors.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations of this study encompassed the setting and the selection of participants. The setting was intentionally limited to private, Christian academies in order to capture data from an environment that is seldom included in research about topics that span public and private education spheres. The participant pool was also limited, including only students from these schools in Grades 6–8 who confirmed that they had experienced teacher empathy. While the lived experiences of teacher empathy carry implications for educators and students at every educational level, the intent of this study was to capture only the voices of middle school students in order to address another gap in the literature base.

There were three primary limitations to this study. First, as the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked considerable havoc across the world, leaders of both schools in this study were forced to shift to virtual instruction. Interview and focus group data collection was limited to the Zoom (2021) virtual platform, significantly diminishing researcher capability to observe participant body language as well as restricting meaningful interaction between participants in the focus group setting. Secondly, conducting this study solely in private, Christian academies potentially limits the transferability of the research findings. Experiences of teacher empathy in large, urban, secular middle schools could be significantly different from opportunities in the small, largely suburban, sectarian schools in this study. Finally, although site selection helped ensure some participant diversity, this study was limited by the absence of teacher-student diversity.

Considering that the literature review indicated teachers may experience difficulty expressing

empathy to students from different cultures (Warren, 2015a), it is possible that participants in this study could have experienced empathy differently in more diverse teacher-student settings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research emanated from situations that emerged during the course of this study and from observed limitations, beginning with possibilities surrounding teacher empathy in virtual settings. When school closures during the COVID-19 global pandemic became widespread, the approval process for this study was already at the IRB level; thus, virtual learning scenarios were not a focus of the study. The issue emerged when two students offered contrasting accounts of their experiences during that time. Hermione fondly described teachers spending extended time after multiple virtual classes to check on her wellbeing. Copper, on the other hand, was clearly frustrated when he recalled that his teacher ignored his request for a teaching adjustment to help him learn virtually. As online instruction in middle schools has continued through the pandemic and appears likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future, developing growth-producing relationships with students in virtual environments is a critical skill (Fisher & Frey, 2020). Therefore, subsequent research should focus on the role of teacher empathy in these scenarios. With modifications to interview questions, the current study could be replicated to identify ways that teachers express affective, behavioral, and cognitive empathy as well as the impacts those expressions have on students.

Although private, Christian academies serve a significant portion of the nation's students (Ee et al., 2018), the overwhelming majority of students matriculate in public schools. Therefore, research regarding students' lived experiences of teacher empathy in public middle schools would be a valuable extension of the current study. Such research could take various shapes. For example, researchers could replicate the current study in transcendental phenomenological

studies in multiple public schools to validate the transferability of the findings. The results of those findings could also be used within a single study designed to compare findings between public schools within or across districts. Findings from public school studies could also be compared to results from efforts in multiple private schools to determine whether the distinct environments affect student experiences.

Finally, empirical literature has explored the role of teacher empathy within culturally relevant pedagogical (CRP) practices. Highlighting perspective-taking in particular, scholars contended there is an ever-increasing need—albeit very difficult to address—for teachers to reach across cultures to connect with student feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Whitford & Emerson, 2019). Although CRP emerged as a theme in the Chapter Two literature review, it did not come forward as part of student lived experiences in this study. Thus, future phenomenological research on middle school teacher empathy could prioritize CRP within purpose statements, research questions, and data collection measures. Simultaneously addressing the teacher-student diversity limitation, researchers should solicit participants whose teacher empathy experiences involved a teacher from a different racial or cultural background. As the nation wrestles with issues of racial and social justice, research on teacher empathy in the context of CRP would be very timely.

Summary

This study constitutes an effort to provide stakeholders at any middle school, but especially those at private, Christian academies, with empirical data upon which to build empathic cultures. Comenius (1896) was among the first to call for gentler approaches in schools that emphasize relationships of mutual trust between teachers and students. Felbiger further stipulated that teacher empathy was essential to exhibiting pedagogical love, the very basis of a

teacher's work (Štěřba, 2018). Rogers (1959) so firmly believed his theories of therapeutic empathy were applicable within educational settings that he codified learner-centered education in a way that placed teacher empathy at the forefront (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Additionally, private, Christian academies are well situated to model empathic, caring communities founded on biblical admonishments and Christian humanistic principles (Howard & Packer, 1985; Roy, 2008). Because there was a lack of research that included the qualitative voices of young adolescent students and a lack of research in private, Christian academies, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experience of teacher empathy for middle school students at two Christian academies in central Alabama. The central research question was, "What are the perceptions of teacher empathy as voiced by middle school students in Christian academies?" This question was designed as a means to explore the lived experiences of middle school students, identifying practices and impacts of teacher empathy to better inform strategic and classroom-level decisions.

The participants in this study were 10 middle school students from central Alabama private, Christian academies who had experienced teacher empathy. Five of the participants attended an all-Black, all-male school in Montgomery, Alabama; the other five students (three White females, two White males) attended a co-ed, mostly White school in a Montgomery suburb. Data were collected via individual interviews, a focus group interview, and a letter to a hypothetical future middle school teacher; all interviews were conducted virtually via the Zoom (2021) platform. NVivo (QSR International, 2021) software was employed for verbatim transcription and to aid with data analysis. Analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) revision of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen model (Colaizzi, 1978). The data analysis produced four major themes: (a) teacher engagement, (b) means of empathy, (c) immediate impact, and (d) long-term impact.

Findings from this study support and extend results from previous theoretical and empirical research, but there was divergence regarding the perceived importance of affective empathy relative to cognitive empathy.

There were several theoretical, empirical, and practical implications that emerged from the findings of this study, two of which succinctly capture the essence of young adolescent experiences and inform Christian school practitioners. First, the findings led to the theoretical implication that teacher empathy framed in the context of established relationships is more effective than spontaneous empathy. This implication carries meaning for strategic decision makers who can use these results to explore options such as looping for middle school structures, thereby facilitating teacher-student connections that span multiple years. Practically, teachers should take full advantage of extended time with students to foster meaningful relationships that form the basis for empathic interactions. Nonjudgmentally prizing students during seemingly small, often functional, empathic moments over the course of a school year paves the path for subsequent encounters into which fundamental or profound empathy may flow. Of significance to stakeholders at private, Christian academies, the second key implication stems from data indicating that teachers in these schools may not be taking full advantage of distinctly spiritual resources in their empathic exchanges. For Christian school administrators, this implies the need to not only focus on a culture of general Christian principles but also on practices like prayer and scripture that bring God's power to bear. Empowered to freely pray and encourage with wisdom from the Bible, teachers can more powerfully exercise empathy while simultaneously drawing students toward the God who perfectly modeled empathy.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

June 3, 2020

Harold Brackins
Kenneth Tierce

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY19-20-314 MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER EMPATHY
IN CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Harold Brackins, Kenneth Tierce:

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the date of the IRB meeting at which the protocol was approved: June 3, 2020. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make modifications in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update submission to the IRB.

These submissions can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your study involves surveying or interviewing minors, or it involves observing the public behavior of minors, and you will participate in the activities being observed.

Your stamped consent form and assent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. These forms should be copied and used to gain the consent/assent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent/assent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent/assent documents should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: IRB Approval of Site Change

June 16, 2020

Harold Brackins
Kenneth Tierce

Re: Modification - IRB-FY19-20-314 MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF
TEACHER EMPATHY IN CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL
STUDY

Dear Harold Brackins, Kenneth Tierce:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for
IRB-FY19-20-314 MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER EMPATHY IN
CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY.

Decision: Approved

Your request to remove [XXX] Christian Academy as a study site and to replace it with
[Midstate] Christian Academy has been approved. Thank you for submitting documentation
of permission from [Midstate] Christian Academy for our review and documentation.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved
study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

Appendix C: Parental Informed Consent Letter

Parental Permission for Children Participation in Research

Title: Middle School Students' Lived Experiences of Teacher Empathy in Christian Schools

Principal Investigator: Harold Brackins

Introduction

My name is Wade Brackins, and I am pursuing a doctoral degree in Education from Liberty University in Virginia. The purpose of this form is to provide you (as the parent of a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to let your child participate in this research study. I will describe the study to you and answer all your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to give your permission for your child to take part in the study. If you decide to let your child be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission.

Purpose of the Study

If you agree, your child will be asked to participate in a research study about how he/she perceived empathy from teachers. The purpose of this study is to identify student experiences with teacher empathy and the impact of those experiences.

What is my child going to be asked to do?

If you allow your child to participate in this study, they will be asked to be interviewed, participate in a focus group, and write a letter to a hypothetical teacher. This study will take two weeks, during which your child will be interviewed twice and write a letter. There will be nine other students in this study from two Christian schools.

Your child will be audio recorded.

What are the risks involved in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. The procedures used in this study may involve risks that are currently unforeseeable.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

Your child will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, there may be societal benefits such as better-informed teachers of middle school students.

Does my child have to participate?

No, your child's participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may decline to participate or to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect their relationship in any way. You can agree to allow your child to be in the study now and change your mind later without any penalty.

This research study will take place during regular classroom hours; however, if you do not want your child to participate, he/she will participate in normal classroom activities.

What if my child does not want to participate?

In addition to your permission, your child must agree to participate in the study. If your child does not want to participate they will not be included in the study and there will be no penalty. If your child initially agrees to be in the study they can change their mind later without any penalty.

Will there be any incentives for participation?

Your child will receive a \$15 restaurant gift card which will be given when I retrieve letters to teachers at the conclusion of my research.

How will your child's privacy and confidentiality be protected if s/he participates in this research study?

Your child's privacy and the confidentiality of his/her data will be protected by the use of a pseudonym. He/She will also have opportunity to read interview materials to determine whether events or statements could be used for identification.

If it becomes necessary, the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University may need to review the study records. If this happens, information that can be linked to your child will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your child's research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order.

If you choose to participate in this study, your child will be audio recorded. All audio recordings will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for one year and then erased.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior to, during, or after your participation you can contact the researcher Harold Brackins at 334-202-2738 or send an email to hwbrackins@liberty.edu for any questions or if you feel that you have been harmed. This study has been reviewed and approved by The University's Institutional Review Board.

Signature

You are making a decision about allowing your child to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you are 18 years or older and have read the information provided above and have decided to allow them to participate in the study. If you later decide that you wish to withdraw your permission for your child to participate in the study you may discontinue his or her participation at any time. You will be given a copy of this document.

Printed Name of Child

Printed Name of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian

Signature of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix D: Student Assent Letter

Student Assent Letter

My name is Wade Brackins, and I am pursuing a doctoral degree in Education from Liberty University in Virginia. I am doing a study to learn about ways teachers show they care about your life. I am asking you to help because students are the best people to tell us about their experiences and how those experiences have affected you.

If you agree to be in my study, I am going to ask you some questions about ways that teachers have shown they care for you. I want to know your feelings and how teacher care makes a difference to students your age. I will also give you the opportunity to write a letter to someone who is preparing to become a teacher so they can know more about showing care to students.

You can ask questions about this study at any time. If you decide at any time not to finish, you can ask us to stop.

The questions I will ask are only about what you think. There are no right or wrong answers because this is not a test.

If you sign this paper, it means that you have read this and that you want to be in the study. If you don't want to be in the study, don't sign this paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you don't sign this paper or if you change your mind later.

Your signature: _____ Date _____

Your printed name: _____ Date _____

Signature of person obtaining consent: _____ Date _____

Printed name of person obtaining consent: _____ Date _____

Appendix E: Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me. Include information about yourself like family (brothers, sisters, etc.), favorite activities, favorite school subjects, and other interesting information.
2. How long have you been at this school? If you have been at another school, please tell me a little about that school.
3. What effect do teachers have on how you feel when you are at school?
4. What incident or incidents connected to a teacher showing empathy (understanding and/or feeling the situation with you) stands out to you (Moustakas, 1994)? Please give as much detail as you feel comfortable providing. Remember that any names you provide will be changed in my report.
5. Please describe how a teacher asked questions to help him or her you understand you and your situation. How did that make you feel?
6. Please describe how a teacher listened to your explanation to help him/her understand you and your situation. How did that make you feel?
7. Please describe how a teacher's body language led you to believe they were feeling your same emotions. How did that make you feel?
8. Please describe how closely the teacher's emotions matched the emotions you were feeling.
9. How did the experience (or experiences) of teacher empathy affect you at the time it happened (Moustakas, 1994)?
10. What feelings did the experience (or experiences) generate in you (Moustakas, 1994)?
11. How has the experience (or experiences) made a difference in your life?
12. How did the experience (or experiences) affect your relationship with the teacher(s)?
13. What else would you like to say about the importance of teacher empathy?

Appendix F: Focus Group Questions

1. What steps do teachers take to get to know you in and out of school?
2. How did the teacher's efforts to see things from your perspective help you better understand your situation?
3. How do you know a teacher understands your feelings?
4. In what ways did the teacher express emotions in response to your situation?
5. Is it more important for you that a teacher understand your situation or appear to feel the same emotions? Why?
6. Describe the experience of teachers attempting to see situations from your perspective.
7. How did your specific experience affect your feelings toward the class (or classes) that teacher taught?
8. How did the experience affect how you see yourself?
9. How did the teacher's efforts help you better show empathy to others?
10. What do you most wish teachers understand about being your age?

Appendix G: Letter Writing Instructions

For this final activity for this research project, I would like for you to write a letter to a person who will be a teacher in the future. You can imagine this person as someone who will teach you in the future or who will teach other students who are your age. This letter may be as short or as long as you wish, but I would like you to include the following information.

- First, briefly introduce yourself by telling this teacher your age, your grade, and whether you are a boy or a girl. Then help them understand that you are writing the letter to talk about how you experienced empathy from a teacher so that you can help new teachers learn how important empathy is to middle school students.
- Next, briefly write about one (or more) times that you experienced empathy from a teacher. Remember that these can be happy experiences or experiences of pain, sadness, or other negative emotions.
 - These experiences may be ones you have already described in our interviews, but it does not have to be that way; you may pick a different event.
 - As you write, please describe the emotions you experienced about the situation and about the teacher.
- Finally, write about the way the experiences affected your school experience. For example, were you more motivated to do well in those classes? Did you feel like you performed better in those classes?

Appendix H: Alex's Teacher Letter

I'm 12 in 6th grade, and I am a boy and it is important to show empathy. Because in classes some people need it, and if they get it, they will like school better and they will come to the teacher when they need some thing or don't understand. It will make them have more courage to ask for help. If the teacher shows empathy, they will trust them more. I know from experience that if you show empathy it will help. I struggled in math, and my teacher would help me after class; it would help a lot. My teacher would boost me up, which gave me confidence to be able to do good work; I felt like I could do the work. If she would have been mean about it, I probably would have thought I couldn't do it and it was just too hard.

Appendix I: Bruce's Teacher Letter

Dear Teacher,

Hello, my name is Bruce, and I'm 13 years old. I am a male that is currently in the 8th grade. I am writing this letter to let you about how I have experienced empathy in the past from a teacher. I had a teacher who would show me empathy when I stopped doing my school work because I felt sad and nervous in class. She would walk up to me and ask what was going on. I would tell her I did not want to do school work because I was feeling anxious, and she would respond by putting her arm on my shoulder telling me everything would be ok. She could relate to me because her son had anxiety also, and that would make me feel better. Knowing she had experience helping others with anxiety helped me focus on my class work and push through the rest of the day. With her helping me get over my anxiety, I was able to focus more on my school work.

Appendix J: Copper's Teacher Letter

Dear Future Teacher

I am 13 years old. My gender is male. I am in the 7th grade going into the 8th grade. I experienced empathy from my math teacher because she understood I was having problems in some areas of math. I also experienced empathy from my English teacher because she always motivated and encouraged me to do better. I felt happy when my teacher understood my learning difficulties; in return, she would know how to help me. Now I know I could do better and I did do better. This took place in history class as well as math. I was motivated to do better because of the help I received and the compassion from my teachers. The whole time my teachers helped me with my learning difficulties, I was still able to maintain good grades. Finally, I always kept a good attitude, I always put God first, I always tried my best, so therefore I had no doubt I would succeed.

Appendix K: Franklin's Teacher Letter

Dear Teacher,

Hi, I am a 12 year old male in the 8th grade. I'm writing this letter to talk to you about my experience with empathy from a teacher. Teacher empathy is when a teacher works to deeply understand a personal situation from a student. At my school, we have morning rituals to get us ready for the day, and I was chosen by my principal to help lead the rituals. When I first started leading, it was tough and stressful but one day, one of my teachers noticed and had a talk with me. While my teacher and I were talking, I could tell that she was really paying close attention to what I was saying because of her facial expressions. She really helped me feel better about leading, because I knew that I had someone to talk to when things were getting tough. While we were talking, my teacher said, "When times get tough one thing you should always do is pray." I will always keep that with me, because I know prayer can help solve a lot of problems. After me and my teacher had this conversation, it made me want to lead more and be at school a lot more. It also motivated me to keep pushing in school. And helped me to perform better in class. Thank you for your time and I hope this helps your teaching experience.

Appendix L: Hermione's Teacher Letter

Dear Teacher,

Hello, my name is Hermione Granger. I am a 13 year old girl going into the 8th grade. I am writing this letter to talk about how I have experienced empathy from a teacher in the past, so I can help new teachers learn why it is very important to show empathy to middle school students. I have experienced teacher empathy during times of sadness, pain, joy, or if I simply did not understand something. During 2019--it was the day before Thanksgiving—we received the disturbing news that my great grandmother, Nanny, had died. It was very hard for my whole family. I was very close to her, and it broke my heart that I had to say goodbye. When school was back in session, some of my teachers noticed I was not my normal self, and they asked what was wrong. When I told my English and Bible teachers, they understood what I was going through. As I was talking to them, they just stood there very quietly as I explained what had happened. They had a saddened expression on their faces as I talked, and they kept nodding their heads. When I was finished, they engulfed me in a big bear hug and told me that they understood what I was going through. They had been in my spot and had experienced a death in their family as well. They told me that they too had been very close to a family member when it was time for them to go live with God. Knowing that they had understood what I just told them, I felt calm and controlled. I was also able to get through the week. A different time I experienced teacher empathy that really meant a lot to me, was during the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. As things got worse, we had to go to virtual school and went into a lock down. While the students were doing homework and going to their Zoom classes, my Math, English, Science, and Bible teachers were checking in on me. They were asking how I was holding up, if I needed some extra help with anything, and they were just acting like real friends instead of teachers. Then, in turn I

would ask them if they were doing fine. It meant so much to me both times that they were being so sweet and kind. After my Great Grandmother passed, they comforted me, and it made me want to work harder in those classes. It made me comfortable with those teachers and it made me feel good about myself being the “nerd” in every single class. They made me feel like I could do anything with the help of God, and they made me want to perform better in the classroom and on the volleyball court. I do not think that a lot of teachers show empathy to students when they need it. When teachers give their students empathy, it helps them learn better, make better grades, and it also helps them to realize the importance of life. Teachers are the role models for their students. When teachers show empathy towards their students, then the students learn how to be empathetic to others. They just need someone to love, and show them the true way to live.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Appendix M: Layman's Teacher Letter

Dear Future Teacher,

I'm a guy and going to the 9th grade this upcoming school year. So this letter is intended to express the importance of empathetic teachers. I personally am under the impression that it is better for a teacher to be empathetic. Firstly because as a student I feel more connected, so to speak, to a teacher when it's apparent that they have some emotional connection to their students. Things like that make it easier to approach teachers, especially in hectic or weighed situations. Although it doesn't seem like it makes a difference in the long term, in my experience it definitely sets a teacher apart from others.

I've been in a couple of situations where empathy has played a generous part in my relationship with those teachers as opposed to others. A while ago I had a science teacher who I was reconnected with (he was my third grade teacher, and we were reunited during my sixth and seventh grade school years). Another teacher and I had somewhat of a verbal altercation. I was accused of cheating and was forced to flunk a test, but I had a borderline heated discussion with the teacher. I pointed out the fact that I had never made lower than a high 'B' on anything ever assigned before. Therefore, I would have no motive to cheat making me ineligible for this accusation. As [the empathic teacher] considered these points, he started to ask several questions about how I felt about the situation, what I think happened, what I think should happen, etc. It was salient that he made it clear that he cared. Experiencing these instances made me more comfortable around these teachers. That made me receive information from these teachers easier than a teacher I had barely made a connection with. That smoother transference of information and skills made me understand material better and produced a better academic result.

Appendix N: Luna's Teacher Letter

Dear Future Teacher,

Greetings! I am a 12 year old girl who will be going into the 7th grade this upcoming school year. I am writing this letter to help new teachers understand the importance of teacher empathy and how it affects students. In order to do this, I will be sharing my personal story from when I have experienced empathy from a teacher.

This story took place at the beginning of last school year. There was a boy in my English class named James (that isn't his real name, but we're just going to use it for this story). To put it lightly, me and James didn't get along. We were constantly finding ways to provoke each other and often got into arguments in class that would result in us both getting in trouble. His remarks in class were distracting and made it hard to focus, and I'm sure I was distracting him as well whenever I fired a comment back at him. After about a month of trying my best to ignore him, I had enough and decided to talk to my English teacher. I was definitely a little skeptical about talking to her about my problem. I expected her to just say something like, "There is no reason you two shouldn't get along. You and James need to solve this issue fast. If not, I'll send you two to the counselor's office and she can help you two get along." However, she handled it a lot differently than I had expected. I told her about my issue with James and how I felt it was affecting not only me, but him as well. As I was explaining the problem further, I noticed that my teacher actually looked invested in what I was trying to tell her. She didn't look uninterested, or like she thought I was wasting her time. She just stood in front of me and listened, nodding her head and asking the occasional question. The more I explained the situation, the more I could tell that my teacher was really trying to look at this situation from my perspective and understand how I felt about it. That really put my mind at ease. It made me feel like I could trust her. While

explaining, there were parts where I didn't quite know how to put my feelings into words, but knowing that my teacher understood how I felt made it feel like I didn't have to. It was like she knew how I felt without me having to tell her. After I had finished explaining the situation to my teacher, she said to me, "Well, I can see how this would be distracting for you and James. I will rearrange the seating in your class and try not to partner you two up for projects. Maybe you should think of a way to talk to him. It will probably take some time for you two to get along, so until then I will try to keep you separated. Thank you for telling me!" I was very grateful that my teacher was going to do something to keep me and James apart, but I was also very grateful that she wasn't going to pressure me to solve the problem right away. She understood that it was going to take time for me and James to be able to get along. I felt as if a huge weight had been taken off my shoulders knowing that I would be able to solve this issue at my own pace. It took me a while, but me and James are now on good terms.

After the talk with my English teacher, I noticed that I started to feel a lot more motivated in her class. Because I knew that my English teacher was a considerate person who understood the feelings of her students, I liked that teacher a lot more. I felt safe in her class and knew I could talk to her if I ever needed to. I found myself looking forward to her class and enjoying English a lot more than I used to. She made that class so much fun. My grade in her class quickly rose from a 93 to a 100. And by the end of the year, English had become my favorite subject and my best subject! It is important to remember that the way a teacher acts can greatly influence how the students feel in the classroom.

Sincerely, 7th Grader