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## “This is My Family Outside of My Family”: Care-based Relating in a Model Early College High School<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Early college (EC) is a novel educational model in the US that combines high school and college in an effort to increase underrepresented students’ access to higher education by providing engaging, hands-on instruction in a supportive learning environment. For this phenomenological inquiry, we sought to understand the role of care-based relating in a model early college by examining how relationships are manifested and experienced at this school. Through 30-45 minute interviews, eleven participants (three sophomores, three seniors, and five teachers) described EC teachers’ high level of

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commitment to students' academic success through: (a) responsive instruction in classroom and group contexts; (b) additional learning support for individual students; and (c) varied experiences from traditional school contexts. EC teachers found these efforts fostered student commitment to learning. Additionally, teachers and students noted the extraordinary commitment of EC teachers to the physical, social, and emotional wellbeing of learners demonstrated through: (a) family-like relationships; (b) promoting social and emotional wellbeing through timely advice and intervention; (c) joining students through tragic and intense personal and out-of-school realities; and (d) forming longitudinal connections with students and their families. However, this commitment resulted in teachers taking on significant burden when there was a lack of structural supports available for all learners. Findings hold implications for educational policy and school structuring that can promote educational equity and success through meaningful relationships, responsive practices, wrap-around services for students with out-of-school challenges, and teacher-support structures to ensure the longitudinal development and wellness of teachers, preventing burnout and attrition.

**Keywords:** early college; care-based relating; teacher-student relationships

### **“Esta es mi familia fuera de mi familia”: Relación basada en un modelo de cuidado en la escuela secundaria y la universidad**

**Resumen:** “Early College” (EC) es un modelo educativo innovador en los Estados Unidos que combina la enseñanza media y la universidad en un esfuerzo para aumentar el acceso de los estudiantes sub-representados a la enseñanza superior, proporcionando instrucciones prácticas e involucradas en un ambiente de aprendizaje de apoyo. Para esta investigación fenomenológica, buscamos comprender el papel de la relación basada en un modelo de cuidado de la universidad al examinar cómo las relaciones se manifiestan y se experimentan en esta escuela. A través de entrevistas de 30 a 45 minutos, once participantes (tres estudiantes de segundo año, tres senior y cinco profesores) describieron el alto nivel de compromiso de los profesores de la CE con el éxito académico de los alumnos a través de: (a) instrucción responsiva En contextos de clase y grupo; (b) soporte de aprendizaje adicional para estudiantes individuales; (c) experiencias variadas de contextos escolares tradicionales. Los profesores de la CE descubrieron que estos esfuerzos promueven el mayor compromiso de los estudiantes en aprender. Además, profesores y alumnos observaron el compromiso extraordinario de los profesores de la CE con el bienestar físico, social y emocional de los alumnos demostrados a través de: (a) relaciones familiares; (b) promover el bienestar social y emocional a través de un oportuno asesoramiento e intervención; (c) juntar a estudiantes a través de trágicas e intensas realidades personales y fuera de la escuela; y (d) formar conexiones longitudinales con alumnos y sus familias. Sin embargo, este compromiso resultó en que los profesores asumieron una carga significativa cuando hubo falta de apoyos estructurales disponibles para todos los alumnos.

**Palabras-clave:** inicio de la universidad; relaciones basadas en cuidados; relaciones profesor-alumno

### **“Esta é a minha família fora da minha família”: Relacionamento baseado em um modelo de cuidados em ensino médio e faculdade**

**Resumo:** “Early College” (EC) é um modelo educacional inovador nos EUA que combina o ensino médio e a faculdade em um esforço para aumentar o acesso dos estudantes sub-

representados ao ensino superior, fornecendo instruções práticas e envolventes em um ambiente de aprendizagem de apoio. Para este inquérito fenomenológico, buscamos compreender o papel da relação baseada em um modelo de cuidados de faculdade ao examinar como os relacionamentos são manifestados e experimentados nesta escola. Através de entrevistas de 30 a 45 minutos, onze participantes (três estudantes de segundo ano, três “senior” e cinco professores) descreveram o alto nível de compromisso dos professores da CE com o sucesso acadêmico dos alunos através de: (a) instrução responsiva em contextos de sala de aula e grupo; (b) suporte de aprendizagem adicional para estudantes individuais; (c) experiências variadas de contextos escolares tradicionais. Os professores da CE descobriram que esses esforços promovem o maior empenho dos estudantes em aprender. Além disso, professores e alunos observaram o compromisso extraordinário dos professores da CE com o bem-estar físico, social e emocional dos alunos demonstrados através de: (a) relacionamentos familiares; (b) promover o bem-estar social e emocional através de um oportuno aconselhamento e intervenção; (c) juntar estudantes através de trágicas e intensas realidades pessoais e fora da escola; e (d) formar conexões longitudinais com alunos e suas famílias. No entanto, esse compromisso resultou em que os professores assumiram um fardo significativo quando houve falta de apoios estruturais disponíveis para todos os alunos.

**Palavras-chave:** início da faculdade; relacionamentos baseados em cuidados; relacionamentos professor-aluno

## Introduction

In the first months of the Trump presidency, Betsy DeVos, a staunch supporter of vouchers and “school choice” through entrepreneurial and philanthropic charter networks funded through public funding, has been confirmed as the new Secretary of Education. Her nomination to this post was met by opposition that some senators described as “unprecedented” involvement from constituents urging that her nomination be blocked by the senate (Caldwell, 2017). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) which replaced No Child Left Behind (2001) has located more autonomy and independence to states and local districts to make decisions about education and educational funding. In spite of that bipartisan decision to reallocate much of the decision making power to local communities, in recent weeks, House Bill 610 “Choices in Education Act” has been proposed (King, Harris, & Franks, 2017). Should it pass, it will repeal the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and limit the role of the Department of Education to merely redistributing federal funding to states that agree to implementing an extensive voucher program for elementary and secondary students. Additionally, in this legislative session, Representative Thomas Massey from Kentucky proposed HB 899, legislation proposing the complete dismantling of the US Department of Education before 2019 (Kamenetz, 2017; Massey, 2017).

It is within this political climate that we sit to reconsider the lessons we have learned from research on one philanthropically supported school innovation, the Early College Initiative (backed by Bill and Melinda Gates) and the lessons and implications for innovative schooling structures as they are experienced by the learners and teachers themselves. We feel that it is particularly critical, in these times where traditional public schools are under such public and political criticism and attack, to listen carefully to the voices of students and teachers who have participated in an innovative school reform practice. While many would say that small sample sizes from one school in North Carolina have few implications for policy more broadly, we join Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis, (1997) asserting that “in the particular resides the general” (p. 14). In other words, it is only

by really listening to the experiences and voices of some who are served in what is purported to be a model and successful version of this philanthropically supported innovative school structure, that we may hear echoes of possibility and implications which can help us ask questions that can inform policy more broadly. The voices of individuals and the stories they tell do have significant insights for policy and practice, if we take the time to listen and then to ask the questions that arise from these voices in more broad and systematic spaces.

In this inquiry we have taken a phenomenological perspective in order to position the voices of those most impacted by school reform and innovative schooling methods at the center. Phenomenology assumes that individuals make meaning from their lives and that the essence of an experience can be determined when a number of “persons who have had the experience ...are able to provide a comprehensive description of it.” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Through the use of phenomenology, we intend to describe the phenomenon of care-based relating in this Early College to understand the “social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved” (Welman and Kruger, 1999, p. 189) in order to understand individuals’ lived experiences (Greene, 1997; Holloway, 1997). Specifically, in this inquiry we have sought to understand how teachers and students experience the phenomenon of “care-based relating.” Throughout this manuscript, we define the phenomenon of care-based relating as teacher-student confirmation (Noddings, 2016), or a process in which individuals authentically know others and intentionally affirm the best in others. This is demonstrated when individuals attend to and endeavor to ensure fulfillment of the holistic needs of others (cognitive, physical, emotional, social, etc.) (ASCD, *Whole Child Indicators*, n.d.; CDC, n.d.; Maslow, 1943).

## The Early College Initiative

Researchers (Miller & Corritore, 2013; Zalznick, 2015) have called for policies and practices which support students (particularly students underrepresented in higher education) in smoothing the transition from K-12 to post-secondary education. Dual enrollment programs, where students attend high school for part of the day and college for a portion of their credits rarely offer structures of support and assume that students will be successful academically without those intentional structures. Barnett, Maclutsky, & Wagonlander (2015) argue that these programs may lack the necessary supports to promote access and equity for all students.

In contrast, Early College schools, as an innovative school design, can offer insights for policy makers, administrators, educators, families, and students (Barnett, Maclutsky, & Wagonlander, 2015; Sáenz and Combs, 2015) committed to supporting all young adults through and beyond this complex transition. Early college proponents and the philanthropic funders who initiated this endeavor (specifically the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Jobs for the Future) intend for EC to support higher education access for underrepresented students (Jobs for the Future, 2003; Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009; Miller, Fleming, & Reed, 2013), particularly first-generation college students, low-income youth, English Learners, and students of color (Brooks, 2013; Miller & Corritore, 2013). This stated mission is intended to provide increased and more equitable opportunities for individuals to access skilled jobs and have a more economically secure trajectory. Proponents claim that EC models have “potential to reduce time to degree, improve student opportunities, and provide cost-effective paths to higher education and employment” (Barnett, Maclutsky, & Wagonlander, 2015, p. 48). Ndiaye and Wolfe promoted the model, stating that “Early college designs can go a long way in addressing inequities in college access and completion. They have the potential to make the college aspirations of millions of young people a reality” (2016, p. 37). The model, though a relatively new philanthropically supported educational innovation, has

become more widespread. In 2014, more than 280 ECs served over 80,000 students (Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016, p. 33).

Some specific structures are inherently a part of EC. Through the Early College, students are expected to earn their high school diploma while also completing (tuition free) an associate’s degree or completing up to two years of college credits toward a bachelor’s degree. While there are some variations in the model, this is generally achieved by accelerating high school coursework in order to complete many of the traditional high school curricular requirements during their freshman, sophomore, and junior years of enrollment. In the final years of enrollment, students increasingly take coursework from community colleges or universities. Some ECs (including the context of this study) incorporate the super-senior year in which students complete the requirements of both their high-school and associates degree or core university coursework while applying for universities and transitioning toward more complete participation in higher education settings. The experiences early college students gain through this model are expected to prepare them to successfully meet the demands of higher education when they matriculate more fully into a university.

Funders require that teachers and school leaders attempt to achieve this goal by providing early college students with engaging, hands-on instruction in a supportive learning environment specifically focused on the role of collaborative group work, classroom talk, scaffolding, writing to learn, and questioning in order to support student learning (Brooks, 2013). EC’s are characterized by support structures that encourage and promote success of all learners. For example, Ndiaye and Wolfe (2016) report that some ECs offer a transition program, Back on Track, which focuses on easing the transition students experience as they move into and through their freshman year of college, incorporating enriched academic coursework in order to prepare students academically while offering “informed transition counseling” and “strong academic and social supports.” The support structures of this program extend into the first-year of college to promote students’ “postsecondary persistence and success” (Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016, p. 35). A primary metric of success for all EC programs is their ability to support and graduate successful students.

## **Research on Early Colleges**

Although a relatively new structure for schooling, research on the early college model is finding the model robust in meeting its intended outcomes. From among those who graduated from seventeen early colleges in 2007, more than sixty-five percent were accepted into college, higher than national averages for their peers in traditional high school contexts (Hoffman & Vargas, 2010; American Institutes for Research and SRI, 2013). In their study of “mandated engagement” in the early college, the SERVE researchers at the University of North Carolina Greensboro report survey data from a large data set of ninth graders enrolled in area early colleges, whose survey responses indicated that they perceived their experiences as significantly more positive than their peers in traditional high schools pertaining to each of the five facilitators of engagement in the early college: high academic expectations, rigorous instruction, relevant instruction, academic and social support, relationships with teachers (Edmunds, Willse, Arshavsky, & Dallas, 2013). Referring to early colleges, the authors concluded “it is clear that schools can support facilitators of engagement that create a learning environment that makes it very hard for students not to engage in school” (p. 32). Additionally, reports of high attendance rates (Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010; Edmunds et al, 2013), lower suspensions (Edmunds et al., 2010) and high achievement scores (Edmunds et al., 2010; Hall, 2008) distinguish early college students from their peers in traditional high schools and indicate that early college students graduate from high school with about a year of college credit (Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010). Other findings of the early college impact include a greater

number of early college students taking college preparatory mathematics and English courses than students enrolled in traditional high schools (Edmunds et al., 2010).

### **Situating the Inquiry alongside other School Based Innovations**

Research on ‘relationships as intervention’ has been gaining prevalence recently, particularly related to interventions through the implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS), a three-tiered intervention to manage and modify behavior in now over 7,000 schools (Stage & Galanti, 2017). The PBIS, Office of Special Education Programs, “Tier 2 supports” web page (n.d.) recommends several research-based interventions for students whose behavior is deemed not “responsive to school-wide social behavior expectations.” These include Check and Connect ([C&C]; Sinclair, Christenson, EVELO, & Hurley, 1998), Check-In and Check-Out ([CICO]; Todd, Campbell, Meyer, & Horner, 2008), and Check, Connect, and Expect ([CCE]; Cheney et al., 2009). It is important to note that these interventions focus on students having an adult mentor in the school who provides behavioral feedback daily to students at one or more pre-specified points of the day. Stage and Galanti (2017) argue that these programs vary in emphasis. They explain that some interventions, such as Check and Connect rely primarily upon “a positive interpersonal relationship between the coach and the student” as in the intervention. In contrast, they argue that the Check-In and Check-Out intervention emphasizes the specific feedback an adult provides a student on his/her behavior as recorded and documented on daily progress report, evaluating and giving the student feedback upon his/her performance in relation to the school-wide expectations for behavior. In this intervention, students receive a reward for meeting their daily goal. The Check, Connect, Expect intervention emphasizes both the interpersonal relationships and the specific behavioral feedback.

In contrast to this intervention-based model, where students are expected to meet the stated and universal expectations for behavior in the school, stands the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model (CDC, n.d.; ASCD, *Whole Child Indicators*, n.d.). The WSCC model was introduced in 2014 and co-constructed by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, n.d.) and ASCD, a nonprofit, nonpartisan 140,000 member organizations of teachers, principals, superintendents, professors, and advocates from over 134 countries (ASCD, *About Inservice*, n.d.). Created in collaboration with key leaders from public education, school health, and public health, this holistic model was intended to unify the efforts of public health and public education to improve health and learning in support of the cognitive, emotional, social and physical development of all students. This model is framed within five tenets, which focus on ensuring that every child is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. They define “engaged” as ensuring that “each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community” (ASCD, *Whole Child Indicators*, n.d.). Included in the WSCC plan is a commitment to sustainability of this holistic focus through “implementing a proactive approach to identifying students’ social, emotional, physical, and academic needs and design[ing] coordinated interventions among all service providers” in collaboration with “community agencies, service providers, and organizations to meet specific goals for students.”

Rooney, Videto, and Birch (2015) posited that:

The model supports the process of building trust and collaborative relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members. Establishing interest and buy-in from diverse stakeholders is important in generating authentic and meaningful insight related to the needs and assets of the school and overall community. (p. 817-818)

Rather than an intervention approach focusing specifically on the actions of the child in relation to the required behaviors set forth by school leaders, the WSCC framework acknowledges that academic and social interactions are situated within the larger context of students’ lives and the imperative that all of an individual’s needs (including cognitive, physical, social, and emotional) be met (Maslow, 1943). This stance puts the child at the center rather than the behavioral expectations of the school or classroom and promotes a more compassionate stance of support and acknowledges the systematic and community-based and community-oriented supports that might be needed to ensure the success of each child. In contrast to PBIS models which place the onus of responsibility on the child to comply with a school-wide system, it is the responsibility of the school and community to serve and to hold themselves accountable to the holistic needs of each student.

### **Considering These Innovations In Connection With The Ethic Of Care**

Innovative structures and designs for schooling would benefit from consideration of the ideas of Nel Noddings. She argued that:

We will not find the solution to problems of violence, alienation, ignorance, and unhappiness in increasing our security, imposing more tests, punishing schools for their failure to produce 100 percent proficiency, or demanding that teachers be knowledgeable in the subjects they teach. Instead, we must allow teachers and students to interact as whole persons, and we must develop policies that treat the school as a whole community.

Both PBIS (n.d.) and WSCC (ASCD, n.d.; CDC, n.d.) intend to treat the school as a whole community. The variance between them is primarily in the ways that they open opportunities for interaction and for treating the student (and teacher) as whole persons situated in a larger social context.

Noddings (1984) proposed the construct of an ethic of care. Initially, Noddings posited that we care-for those we engage with in person. In contrast, she noted that caring-about merely implied a “benign neglect” (p. 112) for issues and individuals outside of our daily circle. More recently (2002), Noddings posited that caring-about might also be considered our “sense of justice” and necessary for creating “conditions in which caring-for can flourish” (p. 23). She promotes the home and family space as the primary educational location and the need for schooling to not only include the home and outside of school lives of students in school, but also to ensure that each home and family has “at least adequate material resources and attentive love” (Noddings, 2002, p. 289). A critical component of caring proposed by Noddings was that of *confirmation* in which individuals intentionally affirm the best in others and encourage the development of our best selves. Noddings’ construct of confirmation raises particular questions about the processes employed through PBIR to ensure that all students behave according to a single, school-wide ideal of behavior. In contrast, Noddings promotes the type of caring relationship based on authentic knowing and encouraging of the other. She stated:

When we confirm someone, we identify a better self and encourage its development. To do this we must know the other reasonably well. Otherwise we cannot see what the other is really striving for, what ideal he or she may long to make real. Formulas and slogans have no place in confirmation. We do not post a single ideal for everyone and then announce ‘high expectations for all’. Rather we recognize something admirable, or at least acceptable, struggling to emerge in each person we encounter. (Noddings, 2016).



Noddings' constructs of care and confirmation were critical as we considered language about and narratives of care-based relating participants experienced within the EC setting.

### **Research on Care in the Early College**

Researchers have considered the role of relationships in EC contexts. Many proponents of early college attribute positive outcomes to the success of this model in implementing the five facilitators of student engagement and learning. It is difficult to think of these facilitators independently of one another in the early college context, although there is little research mapping the interactions among them. Purposefully designed structures of the early college set up conditions that feed the development of trusting relationships between students and teachers. For example, through small class sizes and other deliberate structures such as weekly Focus Group meetings (Edmunds et al., 2010), Homework Clubs (Ongaga, 2010), and after-school Academic Support sessions, teachers come to know students as individuals, developing an understanding of their knowledges, skills, background, and out of school lives. This knowledge can be utilized to personalize academic and social support for the individual needs of students (Edmunds et al., 2010). Teachers staying after school, demonstrating their commitment to students' success is likely to make their care and concern for individual students and their success transparent and evident to the student, which would foster connection, commitment and, as Miller et al. (2013) suggests, augments students' sense of self-worth. In turn, students respond to such overt displays of care by working to live up to high expectations by doing their best (Ongaga, 2010). It appears therefore that early college relationships, which develop through a concerted teacher effort, are likely to lead to student engagement at high levels by "influencing academic identity, convincing students that they are capable of performing at high levels, and getting seemingly unmotivated students to come to school, stay in school, complete assignments, participate in class, and persist on the face of academic challenges" (Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower, 2008, p. 319).

Cravey (2013) in her inquiry into the school culture of five Early Colleges in Texas, found that students participating in focus groups at each of the five campuses where she located her study noted that the climate of their school was unique due to "caring faculty and staff" (p. 701). Edmunds and colleagues (2010) considered the perceptions of 9th graders enrolled in Early College and those in traditional high school contexts and found students enrolled in early college reporting "positive relationships" more frequently with an effect size of .35 in comparison to traditional high school participants. Students' perceptions provide further evidence that in the early college they feel "valued, trusted, respected, encouraged, and challenged to succeed academically" (Ongaga, 2010, p. 381). Thompson & Ongaga (2011) quoted an early college senior, stating that unlike some teachers in traditional high schools, in early college, teachers "know us by name, they know our personalities and we know theirs. We know what to expect from them. They are really loving" (p. 47). They continue quoting a teacher at an early college, explaining that in the EC context, "you get to know [students] very well. You get to understand their personality, what drives them, what makes them tick" (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011, p. 48). These researchers further found that teacher-student relationships in the early college often extend far beyond the early college campus to communications on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), and to social events (e.g., movies), thereby further personalizing and strengthening the relationships.

These claims about the role of care-based relationships make evident the need to further examine the ways that students and teachers alike experience and describe these relationships fostered in the EC setting. To be sure, there have been inquiries into the evidence-based practices for creating caring secondary schools for students struggling with behavioral and academic concerns which inform and support the need for relationships to uphold behavior and academic

accountability (Cheney et al., 2009; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998; Todd, Campbell, Meyer, & Horner, 2008), however few have been framed around purposeful listening to the voices, lived holistic experiences, and perspectives of EC students and teachers. This holds promise if we, as policy makers, philanthropists, administrators, and educators, are to create innovative school structures attending to and fostering meaningful connections and relationships that can contribute significantly to the educational and life outcomes of individuals.

### **Critiques of the Early College Model in Literature and Research**

In contrast, others have critiqued the early college and its benefits (Alaei, 2011; Brooks, 2013). Brooks (2013) conducted interviews with seven teachers, one counselor, and one principal at an Early College, five observations of daily school routines and seminars he observed over the course of a five week period, and 150 pages of student journal writing. He drew directly from language he found in interviews with teachers and documents written by students to create a verbatim ethnodrama, creating a script in which vignettes and interactions between participants were imagined based on the direct language of participants. There is little evidence that Brooks came to know students personally or that the journal writings he analyzed were representative of how these students would characterize their experiences, relationships, and the meaning that they made from them. Brooks believed that this performative representation of his ethnographic data "reflect[ed] the composite attitudes and perceptions of the teachers and students [he] came to know" (p. 223). His thematic findings included:

- (a) the way in which the small size of the early college high school impacts the student learning and relationships with teachers;
- (b) the metaphor of family that students and teachers use to describe their experience at this early college high school;
- (c) the lack of academic preparation of the students admitted to the program;
- (d) the barriers to becoming ready for college that students face;
- (e) the emerging identities of adolescents heretofore not destined for college;
- (f) the family narrative, or life script, reinforced at home;
- (g) and the institutional message of college-going enacted at the early college high school. (p. 220)

Evidenced even within the language of Brooks' (2013) findings is a framework which considers family and institutional scripts as at-odds with each other. His second finding specifically was largely critical of the impact the metaphor of the EC as family had on Early College students. Brooks completed his ethnodrama with a discussion question for audiences and readers, musing "How can schools help students become the authors of their own life narratives?" (p. 242.). We argue that each of us are inherently already the authors of our own life narratives, constructing our world even as we are influenced by others who share the contexts and spaces of our world. Schools (and researchers) do not need to position individuals in this agentive manner, rather, they need to seek to understand, to honor, and privilege the meaning individuals are already constantly making of their lives which are constructed and lived out in a range of spaces and relationships.

In another critique of the Early College model, Alaei (2011), reports on a college biology instructor who frequently taught lecture-based courses with around 700 students and who endeavored to provide additional support for the 37 early college students enrolled in her course by fostering "relationship-based instruction" (p. 429). In addition to the two large lecture sessions a week, she offered three additional weekly meeting sessions. The first meeting consisted of a 3-hr laboratory session<sup>1</sup> headed by a teaching assistant. The second meeting session was a 1-hour recitation session led by a teaching assistant. The third meeting was a one-hour discussion session the instructor led. Far fewer than 50% of the students were observed to attend the weekly recitation

and discussion sessions, and about 84% of the students failed the first midterm exam. Student attendance declined further following a similar failure on the second midterm. Following the midterm students became increasingly disengaged and Alaei noted that they “arrived later and made more elaborate displays of their disinterest, including yawning, staring at the desk, checking their phones, and passing notes,” and more importantly, “[t]he students appeared to give up, acting as if they felt there was no chance for them to pass the course” (p. 430). The continuing disengagement continued as 11 of the 37 students did not take advantage of the extra-credit essay exam and eight of those eleven students did not turn in the required lab report. Only five of the 37 students passed the final exam, and 13 of the 37 students passed the class with only two students earning higher than a C. Alaei followed up with nine of the 37 early college students during their freshman semester in college, and noted that none of the students took a science course beyond those for satisfying the natural science general education requirement (i.e., geography and geology). She attributed students’ loss of interest in science to their unsuccessful experience in her course during their early college experience. She argued that early college might be doing more harm to students than good.

Several flaws are apparent in Alaei’s argument, however, as her interventions for “relationship-based instruction” were not providing opportunities for EC students to interact with her two thirds of the time as these sessions were led by a teaching assistant (TA). Additionally, her description of the three weekly supplemental sessions is devoid of detailed description of the type of efforts she or the teaching assistants made to foster authentic relationships. There is no evidence of authentic relationships fostered during these sessions or inside or outside of her regular class sessions. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how recitation sessions with a TA might ever support relationship building, most especially with someone who is not present.

Alaie’s depiction and understanding of ‘relationship-based’ work varies significantly from what most who consider the complexity of teacher-student relationships of trust and mutuality employ. Others have found, in stark contrast to the findings of Alaie, that the impact of the “relationship-based” instruction offered to the early college students facilitates high attendance (Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010; Edmunds et al, 2010) and achievement (Edmunds et al., 2010; Hall, 2008) among early college students. Edmunds et al., (2010) noted that early college gains in student engagement have been achieved through relationships that allow teacher expectations to be clearly conveyed to students and academic needs of individual students to be addressed through a concerted effort for the early college to do “everything it could to help” a student experiencing academic problems. This was even the case “if the student did not seek it out” (Edmunds et al, 2010, p. 25). According to one early college student in Roberts’ (2007) study of student engagement in early colleges, “Here we get one on one time with our teachers. The environment is great for learning. The teachers make you feel as if you can do anything. When we don’t understand something they are willing to go over it until we get it” (p. 82). Many would argue that these perspectives are authentic demonstrations of care-based relating between teachers and students which more meaningfully foster support, engagement, and student success.

We join many others (Meyers, Dowdey, & Patterson, 2000; Meyers, Fisher, Alicea, & Bloxson; Tierney, 2004) in a concern that those who are most affected by educational practices are often not actively positioned and represented as central and essential voices at the intersections of educational research and policies. Therefore, we have constructed our inquiries to privilege and honor the voices, experiences, meanings, and interpretations of the students and teachers experiencing this innovative model for school reform.

## **Our Previous Research Calling for this Inquiry**

Our previous research (Ari, Killacky, & Angel, 2014) raised our awareness about the need for research and practice that focuses on the strategies and structures of support which have made EC such a meaningful experience for many students. In our previous quantitative inquiry (Ari et al., 2014) we studied one of four early college model schools in the state of North Carolina, reanalyzing data from the YouthTruth survey of early colleges. The YouthTruth survey was conducted and analyzed by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP, n.d., 2010), a nonprofit organization which intends to improve philanthropic programs through analysis of program impact and effectiveness by gathering feedback from stakeholders (CEP, n.d.). The YouthTruth survey they administered to all EC students in North Carolina in 2009 and 2010 was a Likert-based instrument that collected student demographics and used self-report data to analyze students' academic achievement and their perceptions of their experiences in the EC setting in order to understand the possible impact of this new model for high schools. We engaged in a secondary analysis of this data as we hoped to more meaningfully consider the impact of several of the key components of the EC model. Therefore we conducted a regression analysis to predict the impact of student engagement and school culture on students' academic achievement (Ari et al., 2014). We found often that as students became seniors in early college and were taking more of their courses on traditional college campuses, there was a decline in self-reported academic achievement and simultaneously in a factor considered 'engagement' compared to sophomores, who were mostly enrolled in courses at the early college campus. In this previous inquiry, "engagement" indicated the pride that they felt in their work, their opinion about the high quality education they were receiving, and their enjoyment of school. We hoped to understand the shifts in the experiences EC students had as they moved toward more traditional models of schooling in an effort to consider how some of the factors and experiences that learners reported as critically important to their success on the EC campus might be sustained across contexts.

Results of the YouthTruth survey placed the school average for the model EC school we were collaborating with at the top (the 100<sup>th</sup> percentile) of the range of all respondents, surpassing the state (at about the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile) and national (the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile) averages. The pattern of responding on individual items that directly related to care-based relating (i.e., How many of your teachers are willing to give extra help on school work if you need it? and How many of your teachers make an effort to understand what your life is like outside of school?) mirrored these exceptionally high averages. Particularly in light of Alaei's (2011) findings and condemnation of EC based on her problematic frame of 'relationship-based instruction' we felt it important to carefully consider the care-based relating fostered in this context and their complex interplay with student engagement. Therefore, we sought to engage in a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experience of teachers and students at this early college in order to more clearly understand the essence of care-based relating as a phenomenon and the attending experiences of students and teachers within the social world of this model early college high school.

## **Phenomenology through a Social Constructionism Theoretical Framework**

Social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1966), provides a framework appropriate for this phenomenological inquiry as it acknowledges that "reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the processes in which this occurs" (p. 1). Since phenomenological approaches are intended to illuminate the meaning individuals make through a comprehensive depiction of a specific lived experience, constructing and sharing the meaning through the telling of their experiences to another, phenomenology through the lens of social

constructionism holds particular promise for examining relationships and the meaning individuals make from them.

Gergen (1985) argued that inquiry framed within social constructionism should be “principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (p. 266). Framing this inquiry within a theorized social constructionism meant honoring participant perspectives that “social and psychological worlds are made real (constructed) through social processes and interaction” (Young & Collin, 2004) and therefore required that we, as researchers, focused on context, interpretation, and meaning participants made from interactions in these social spaces (Crotty, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). Social constructionism provided us, the researchers in this inquiry, a framework for considering and honoring multiple perspectives related to the social processes, interactions, and context experienced by students and teachers in this early college context and created opportunities for consideration of the interpretation and meaning made by these participants of their shared interactions, spaces, and relationships.

## **Method**

Since we were interested in the lived experiences of students and teachers who shared classroom and relational spaces within this unique educative context, a phenomenological approach to this inquiry was most helpful. Phenomenology is the appropriate method for inquiries that question how a phenomenon is manifested and how it has been experienced by those who have lived it. Phenomenological research from a sociological perspective seeks to understand how individuals consciously engage in the process of making meaning from and within their everyday lives and social interactions (Creswell, 1998). This method is particularly well suited for our inquiry as each of our two research questions reflect this stance toward knowing and coming to understand. Our research questions driving this inquiry were:

- How is the phenomenon of care-based relating manifested in this early college context?
- How is this phenomenon experienced by teachers and students?

### **The Context: McGuire Early College High School**

McGuire Early College High School (MECHS), a pseudonym, was founded on the campus of a community college located in western North Carolina in 2006. MECHS is one of four model schools as part of the Learning Laboratory Initiative in North Carolina. As a model school, MECHS is open to visits by North Carolina teachers, administrators and others to observe classrooms, interact with their early college peers, and experience the school culture. North Carolina New Schools Project (NCNSP) is a grant funded by the Gates foundation that began in 2003 and aimed to support the creation of smaller high schools and to support EC high schools. This grant reported that MECHS had “student performance exceeding 90% on the composite of state End of Course test scores with no dropouts, high attendance rates and practically no teacher attrition” (North Carolina New Schools Project, n.d.). Records indicated MECHS student performance at or above 97.04% on the composite state End of Course test scores in 2011 with 97% attendance rate. According to school records, 56% of the school’s first graduating class (2011) earned an Associate’s degree; the remaining 44% graduated with 30 hours or over a year of college credit. The average transferrable college credit per student was 55 hours in this cohort and the weighted average Grade Point Average (GPA) 3.602 including grades earned in early college courses and college courses.

Other school records from the 2011-2012 academic year show 74% of MECHS students as first generation college-goers.

MECHS students’ responses on the YouthTruth survey indicate that the students attending MECHS varied demographically from their peers in NCNSP and national early college (EC) high schools. A vast majority of MECHS students were White. In addition, compared to the national EC (62%) and NCNSP school (44%) averages, fewer (40%) MECHS students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and fewer MECHS students take special education courses: 1% versus the 8% national average and the 3% NCNSP average. Moreover, about 75% of the MECHS students reported earning mostly A’s and B’s in their high school courses, higher than the average NCNSP (about 75%) and national EC (about 45%) school. All MECHS students tested proficient in reading based on their performance on the 2008-2009 North Carolina End of Grade Test compared to 85% of NCNSP students and 66% of North Carolina students in general. Fewer MECHS students were proficient in math (85%), but the school’s math performance was still better than the average performance of NCNSP (71%) and all North Carolina high school students (73%).

The type of courses taken by MECHS students provides some indication that one of MECHS’s major aspirations is post-secondary education for its students. A greater number of MECHS students (85%) reported taking Honors courses or courses for college credit than the national EC students (45%); most of the national EC students reported taking general/regular courses. MECHS’s college focus appears to emerge as early as the sophomore year, which coincides with an uptick in the enrollments for Honors courses and college credit-bearing courses; eighty-nine percent of sophomores reported taking these courses compared to 68% of freshmen.

Overall, students at MECHS rated many aspects of their school experience more positively than the rest of the YouthTruth respondents. MECHS students on average were more likely to *strongly agree* that they would have more options after graduating because of what their school has done for them than a student in a typical NCNSP or typical national EC school. To be sure, the student demographic characteristics must be taken into consideration when we think about why this school was considered by NCNSP to be a “model” with “exemplary” results. Nevertheless, the experiences and challenges participants in this inquiry experienced both in and outside of school settings and their extraordinary need for support are likely to provide insights for those endeavoring to support students in this challenging and transitional life stage.

## **Participants**

In order to have an initial cross-section of participants with a range of years and experiences within MECHS, our school-based contact randomly selected three students and one teacher from each of the five grade levels (9-12 and super-seniors) to be interviewed as study participants. This was done using the lists of students and faculty names alone, without taking into consideration the demographics or representation of the school. While random sampling is not generally a preferred method for phenomenology and is often utilized in order to generalize findings, we purposefully and intentionally used random sampling since all individuals in the school- students and teachers alike- were likely to have experiences with and to have made meaning from relationships. Random sampling enabled us to ensure that those selected for participation were not cherry picked or selected by our school contact due to particularly positive relationships with teachers and other students. In effect, it was a means of reflecting the essence of the experience without having a single or popular narrative that would merely portray MECHS positively. Twenty MECHS participants were invited to participate in the inquiry. The school-based contact person provided the informed consent to invited participants. When participants came to interviews with Author 1, they discussed

any questions about the research process before the interviews began. Nineteen consented to participation in this study, including 14 students and five teachers.

In this study we report on our findings from interviews conducted with three sophomores, three seniors and five teachers at MECHS. Please see the Table 1 for information about the interviewed students and teachers whose data is included in this inquiry. The table is intentionally comprised of participants (using pseudonyms) and non-identifying information (participants: grade level, gender, racial background, content area of teaching). As much of the interview data below indicates, students and teachers alike shared stories of vulnerability within their interviews. Honoring confidentiality and anonymity have been important considerations within this inquiry.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Racial Background	Grade level/Subject matter
<b><i>Students</i></b>			
Henry	M	White	12
Amy	F	White	10
Brandy	F	White	12
Jack	M	White	12
Erica	F	White	10
Gina	F	White	10
<b><i>Faculty</i></b>			
Mr. Kendal	M	White	Physical Science
Ms. Lacy	F	White	English
Ms. Madison	F	White	Seminar
Ms. Osborn	F	White	U.S. History
Ms. Nelson	F	White	Seminar and British literature

While by and large the interviews from students and teachers across grade levels demonstrated marked similarities in content and themes, we chose to focus on the interviews of sophomores and seniors in response to findings from our previous inquiry. In our logistic regression analysis of school-wide data, from the YouthTruth survey, unique variances emerged in the perspectives of engagement and academic achievement between the responses of sophomores and seniors. Although both groups on average equally reported that their relationships with adults at the school were highly positive, the seniors reported being the most disengaged group among all MECHS students whereas the sophomores' average rating placed them at the top of all survey

respondents on items that pertained to student engagement. This distinction made us particularly interested in the relational experiences lived by each of these groups. Also, both of these groups of students represented those who had been in the context for more than one year and who had a longer shared history with MECHS across time.

### **Data Collection**

For this phenomenological inquiry, we conducted and audio-recorded one 30-45 minute interview with each of the MECHS participants (three seniors, three sophomores, and five teachers) in order to ascertain the central underlying meaning and essence of care-based relating in the context of this model early college. These open-ended interviews were structured with a tentative protocol (See Appendix A) to elicit the stories, experiences, and perspectives of the participants. All participants were initially asked the question: How would you describe your experiences in the early college? Follow-up inquiries asked individuals to describe an event or an episode that exemplified that experience. We probed for events and episodes requiring intense teacher involvement in responding to student needs that characterized teachers' commitment to the early college model. Interviews were conducted with each participant in the span of a month (April, 2011), were transcribed verbatim, and each participant assigned a pseudonym.

### **Researcher Positionality and Bracketing**

Distilling meaning from a number of perspectives on an experience requires the researcher to be clear about his/her biases and perspectives so as to attempt to bracket them and avoid an a priori interpretation of the data. It should be noted that Author 1 the primary researcher in this inquiry who both collected and analyzed the data was hired by Authors 3 and 4 as an external researcher on their grant. This outsider status meant that he had very limited previous knowledge of the context and was not entering the research expecting or hoping for a specific outcome. The information included in this manuscript and the literature around EC was not a part of his framework at the time of data collection and analysis. In this role as an outside researcher, Author 1 was able to enter the research context with a disposition open to listen and discover the essence of the experience from the storied perspectives of the participants. Author 1 engaged in bracketing, both during and after the interviews were completed, memoing his thoughts and interpretations along the way. Author 2 joined this endeavor in the final stages of analysis and writing. She offered both a qualitative analytical perspective and understandings of care-based relating and pedagogies which supported the findings and implications.

### **Data Analysis**

As Author 1 transcribed each interview of the sophomores, seniors, and teachers verbatim, he particularly listened for stories which evidenced the relationships between students and teachers and the ways that these relationships were manifested and experienced by the participants. Author 1 followed the recommendations of Holloway (1997) and Hycner (1999), and listened to the audio-recordings of each interview multiple times each in order to "become familiar with the words of the interviewee/ informant in order to develop a holistic sense, the 'gestalt'" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 18) of each participant's experiences and perspectives. This phase of listening for participant perspectives and privileging them over the perspectives of the researcher served as a critical practice for bracketing researcher perspectives.

After listening to each interview multiple times and transcribing it verbatim, Author 1 began the process of open coding, jotting down the units of meaning from each of the transcribed and audio-recorded interviews (Groenewald, 2004). He annotated each transcript, highlighting key



words, phrases, and ideas shared by that participant. This open coding process was an initial pass at noting the ideas and experiences each participant shared about relationships they had formed and experienced at MECHS. With each additional interview transcription and review, this process of annotating units of meaning was conducted. Through this process, Author 1 developed a loose heuristic and set of meaning categories, *in vivo* codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldaña, 2016), which he had pulled directly from the language of participants. These included: (a) family-like relationships; (b) the power of small class sizes; (c) teacher protectiveness of students; (d) students and teachers sharing intense and often tragic personal experiences; (e) teachers relating long term to graduates; (f) the connections between strong relationships and student learning; (g) middle school vs. early college experiences with teachers; (h) teacher commitment; and (i) student commitment.

After this stage was completed, Author 1 was joined by Author 2, and together they began the process of axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998; 2003; Saldaña, 2016), clustering meaning units into themes and identifying connections between these themes. As noted by Groenewald (2004, p. 20) and Hycner (1999, p. 153) the clusters of meaning and themes reflected human phenomena in that they were overlapping and related. These clusters of themes, when taken together, illuminated the complex and interrelated ways the phenomenon of care-based relating was experienced by learners and teachers at this early college and how they interpreted and described this phenomenon. As Authors 1 and 2 continued to analyze these initial themes they found that themes could be distilled into two key axial codes of analysis which together depicted the essence of the experience of care-based relating for those participants: (a) a strong commitment to students' learning and academic success, coupled with (b) a significant and demonstrated concern and commitment by teachers to students' physical and emotional wellbeing.

Finally, Authors 1 and 2 compiled a composite summary of the care-based relating experiences of participants that were shared during the interviews. Critically, this included noting not only general themes which cut across the experiences of multiple participants, but also unique perspectives, "counterpoints" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 21) and concerns shared by specific individuals (Hycner, 1999) regarding their experiences and challenges in the Early College context. This means that we were not only interested in convergences of perspectives and ideas, but also in the stories of individuals which varied from the common threads and themes participants shared. We examined themes that emerged as critically important to participants as they shared their stories of relationships. By including varied perspectives of multiple participants within the themes, we attempted to highlight the nuanced experiences of individuals. Attending to both convergent and divergent experiences was in coming to understand the challenges and opportunities of relationships in this EC context. Specifically, there was a teacher who shared perspectives that, while not representative of multiple participants, was important to explore as it was her unique experience with the phenomena of student/teacher relationships in MECHS.

### **Limitations of the Inquiry**

A noted limitation of this inquiry is the fact that several years had passed between the collection of data and the final analysis. This meant that returning these findings to the participants themselves was no longer possible as students had graduated from MECHS. We regret the impossibility of returning the data to the participants themselves in order to ensure that the themes and categories authentically represented their experiences. We have worked to mitigate this limitation, however, by extensively quoting participant interviews so that they have spoken for themselves about the meaning they made from their relationships rather than privileging our interpretations and assumptions. Particularly throughout the Finding section, we have relied heavily

on the verbatim statements and words of participants themselves in order to remain faithful to the stories, experiences, and perspectives of the participants and the meaning that they made from their relationships.

An additional limitation is due to the small number of participants (11), the single interview with each as the primary data point, and the fact that these individuals were all a part of the same school community. While these characteristics of the study certainly limit the ability for findings to be generalized, that was not our intention. Rather, we hoped that by listening carefully to the stories and relational experiences of these individuals, we might find implications, and at least questions for more exploration, that would offer wider possibilities for learning and learners. This is particularly critical in a time when "school choice" and "school innovation" are such a part of the discourse, yet it is rare for those students and teachers who are most impacted by these innovations to be at the table when policy decisions are made. Indeed, in the first meeting President Trump and Secretary DeVos called to discuss issues of education under the new administration, ten teachers and parents were invited. Although more than 80% of U.S. children attend traditional public schools, only two of those at the table were from traditional public schools and one was a principal from a public school serving students with special education services. The other seven represented private schooling, home schooling, charter schools, and a dropout prevention program (Cimarusti, 2017). The voices at the table are of critical importance to the creation of policy. It is far too rare for those voices to be the students, families, and teachers most impacted by educational policy decisions. It is our hope that through this inquiry, these voices and the implications of their lived experiences will be amplified and that policies and practices may be informed by the lived experiences of these students and their teachers.

## Findings

The early college experience at MECHS is characterized by mutual and meaningful personal relationships between students and teachers. According to the meaning made by teachers and students alike, these relationships have demonstrated evidence of the MECHS teachers' high level of commitment to the learning and development of their students academically partnered with an extraordinary commitment to the physical and emotional wellbeing of the learners in their classes. Through the experiences of the students and teachers alike, it became evident that care-based relating provided personalized support for the physical, emotional, and academic needs of students in the face of personal and academic challenges. Participants noted that these supports enabled learners to be more engaged in the schooling process and more successful on their journey toward college.

### **EC Teachers' Strong Commitment to Students' Academic Learning and Development**

Based on the experiences and recounts of early college students and teachers alike, it is evident that teacher commitment to students' learning at this early college was demonstrated and made apparent through a variety of deliberate and intentional actions. This was evidenced in several of the meanings shared by teachers and students alike when discussing the role of care-based relating. Themes that emerged through their interviews included: (a) early college teacher commitment to responsive instruction in classroom and group contexts; (b) early college teacher commitment to offering additional learning support to individual students; (c) noted variance between other school vs. early college experiences; and (d) teacher perceptions of student commitment to learning.

**EC teacher commitment to responsive instruction in classroom and group contexts.** Students specifically spoke about their experiences with EC teachers working to make learning opportunities in response to the academic needs of individual learners. Jack, one (senior) student explained that his early college teachers know his personality and learning style: he is a visual learner and prefers visual delivery of instruction. He prefers a teacher who “write[s] stuff out and show[s] me on the board” to a teacher “sitting here talk to me, talk to me, talk to me.” Henry, another senior, echoed the sentiment that instruction in the early college was more supportive of his kinesthetic and active learning needs, saying:

For me when you’re doing things more hands on, it’s just more effective. I feel the teachers really push that, they really help me learn a lot better through that than say lecturing the entire class or something like that.

Early college teachers often spoke about how they tailored their instruction to the interests, needs, personalities, and learning preferences of their students. In the small learning community of MECHS, teachers created engagements and effortfully endeavored to identify how students learn best through various early college structures: The “All About Me” project students complete during their freshman year allows teachers to identify students’ personality traits and learning styles. Each member of the MECHS community is a member of a Focus Group, a longitudinal community of students and a teacher which meets on a weekly basis across three academic years. Across time, teachers and students in these groups learn a great deal about each other and build strong bonds. Other early college activities such as long-term inquiry projects and community-service projects provide teachers with opportunities to learn more about students as they supervise students’ work for extended periods of time. Armed with this information, early college teachers make informed decisions when planning for instructional engagements and full group/small group activities.

This responsiveness is noted by students as well. An early college senior, Jack, explained this type of teacher responsiveness to individual differences and building upon each student’s personality and strengths, stating:

[Teacher] knows that “Ok if I want a good team, I gotta put these extroverts with these introverts and get these people to work together because that’s the only way it’s gonna get done. I can’t put a bunch of introverts together; I can’t put a bunch of extroverts together because it is not gonna get done.”

Jack explained that his early college teachers know who they are as students and as people and therefore can build productive learning groups, placing students together strategically.

Ms. Lacy, explained how her knowledge of students as individuals and collectively shapes her planning, instruction, and support. She stated:

knowing my students drives my instruction and knowing what they’re interested in, and I also know what they really dislike. I can kind of guide my instructional activities based on that. The way that I teach this year is different than the way I taught last year because I have a different group of students.

**EC teacher commitment to offering additional learning support to individuals.** Early college teacher responsiveness was not limited to the ways that early college teachers engaged with learners in full group, class-based spaces. Rather, teachers and students in the early college noted teachers’ responsiveness and support of individual learners as a particularly salient aspect of the early college experience.

Henry, a senior, recalled with appreciation his biology teacher who “offered tutoring and just different things to try to help us get through it all” and who worked to “break things down and just

explain them to us in a simpler fashion." Erica, a sophomore, recounted her math teacher sitting down with her one day to go over everything in the assignment that she kept failing. She says, "the teacher worked with me until I understood everything, and I could bring up my grade up to an A."

Early college teachers noted that they endeavor to ensure that every single student is engaged and ready to learn. They may have to stop teaching in order to understand what may be troubling or distracting a disengaged student. Ms. Lacy explained:

If I notice that a student is really upset in class, rather than just continue teaching I'll get the students started in groups and then pull the student and ask "What's going on? Why are you upset? Is there something going on at home?"

Similarly, Mr. Kendal shared, "I've been telling myself to make sure that everybody's 100% there and we're ready to move on" referring to the science content he is teaching in class, "if not, I need to work on that."

These early college teachers noted that students at times were overwhelmed by the pace of the accelerated early college curriculum and made efforts to intervene when they realized that a student was falling behind. Ms. Osborn stated:

We may have to pull them aside and say "How are you doing? Are you okay?" because they seem a little stressed. [...] Like we pulled students to the table and just said "What's going on? We get a sense that you're really stressed out," or "You're not managing your time," or "Your grades are falling a little bit. How are you doing?"

In order to support students who were beginning to struggle (either in or out of their class) many early college teachers acquainted themselves with content outside of their expertise. Ms. Madison shared that when a student comes to her with a question about content in other courses, she does her best to help clarify and support, even when she herself is experiencing a learning curve. She stated:

If they need help learning something, I try to learn it too. I'm not good at math, but if they're struggling with Civics or U.S. history [...] I taught Spanish; so, I'm pretty good at mnemonic devices and making up ways to try to remember things.

It is particularly important to note that early college teachers also worked collaboratively in support of learners who seemed to be struggling, teaming up to develop a joint strategy. Mr. Kendal recalls a meeting with five other teachers about a sophomore who had a particularly challenging circumstance at home and was struggling with content across multiple courses. Mr. Kendal described meetings, such as this one, where teachers gather together in support of the learner, saying:

Everybody chimes in and they offer up what they think would be best for the student as a five-member team. All five people will come together and say come up with a plan to help. Then everybody goes into their own classroom [...] and they can work on that.

In addition to supporting learners' academic achievement within and across the content of traditional coursework, early college teachers also supported the academic trajectories of their students by assisting them with applications for college and for scholarships, tasks which were daunting for many students. Ms. Madison shared a story of one time when she collaborated with a student on an application for a scholarship to college who was feeling overwhelmed by the multiple tasks and steps of completing the application. Ms. Madison said to the student, "I know you have a lot on your plate right now, but this scholarship...you need to do it. What do you have left to do?"

Just tell me what you haven't completed on this scholarship yet and whatever it is then let's sit down right now and get something done." With the scaffolds that she provided during the collaboration, the student found the task of completing the application much more manageable and went off to complete the application on her own.

Students and teachers noted that the type of full class instruction and individual support offered in the early college context, and the demonstrated commitment of teachers to student understanding and learning was significant to their experiences and that it varied from previous schooling experiences.

**The variance between other school and early college experiences.** Students and teachers alike compared their experiences in early college classrooms with their previous learning and teaching contexts. Students frequently commented on the ways that early college teachers varied from many of their previous teachers in that they made time for them and to support them. Henry, a senior, discussed his experiences in middle school, explaining that middle school teachers were not as available to offer support, saying "you couldn't really talk to them, they came in and they taught and did their own thing." Jack's, another senior, comments reflected a similar experience. He shared, "sometimes in middle school you get the feeling like your teachers don't want to talk to you just because they have so many students to deal with and sometimes that's understandable." He further explained that he felt at times as if, when he had a problem or concern, his middle school teachers just wanted to get rid of him by telling him "just come tomorrow, we'll deal with it some other time." In comparison, he found that his early college teachers were intentional about addressing their students' needs as soon as they can. Jack shared that his early college teachers always make time to help him: "if I need something, I can go to one of these teachers. They're great about making time to talk to you. If they're busy they'll be like 'well come back in 20 minutes and we talk' or 'come back in 10 minutes and we'll talk.'" A sophomore, Amy, echoed the sentiments of Jack, when she describes her early college teachers as big brothers or big sisters who are "always there for me." According to Amy, early college teachers "will usually schedule some type of time if they need to or just be like 'Come back in 15 minutes and I'll be able to help you through anything'" if they are busy when first asked.

It should be noted that, in addition to the strong teacher commitment of early college teachers, one likely factor which facilitates this difference is likely to be the small class sizes which are a trademark of MECHS. This facilitates greater teacher connection involvement with each student, enabling teachers to identify and respond to the learning styles and interests of their students, as well as their ability to respond to the needs of individuals. This reduced class size is a notable difference between early college and more traditional high schools. Jack explained that while he believes that if his early college teachers were to teach in a more traditional setting, they would still try to get to know their students but that it may not be as successful due to the much larger class sizes. He explained further saying "I think it would take a lot longer [to build relationships] than it would here [in the early college]...just because of class sizes." This critical factor has implications into the design of schools across contexts.

Teachers also found that the experience of working in an early college context varied from their work in traditional high schools. Ms. Madison, who taught 12 years at another high school before coming to the early college, explained that while her relationships with previous students in traditional high school contexts were close and friendly, her role felt different. She explained, "I didn't really feel like the buck stopped with me. I wasn't as accountable for their success or failure." This sense of accountability for and commitment to learners was strong throughout the stories and experiences of teachers working in the early college.

**Teacher perception of student commitment to learning.** Early college teachers believed that their commitment to the learning and academic success of students had a positive impact on the engagement, motivation, and commitment of learners. They found that the demonstrated commitment to and confidence of teachers in the academic achievement of learners inspired students to outdo themselves, endeavoring to demonstrate significant growth and to take on the risk and challenge of learning more fully.

Ms. Lacy recounted an experience with a student in whom she saw a lot of potential for writing. She said to the student “I see that you’ve written this but maybe you take it a step further.” When the student did not take up the challenge, Ms. Lacy sat down with the student to make clear the potential that she saw in the student as a writer. After this display of care, Ms. Lacy says “it was just a complete turnaround. She would come into class and ask ‘Ms. Lacy, how can I make this better? What do you see that I can improve here?’”

Ms. Madison observed that she knew that “there are times when [students] wouldn’t [wanna] come to school, but they do because they don’t want to disappoint me. [...] They feel like they should try to live up to expectations.” Another teacher, Ms. Lacy, echoed this sentiment, stating that “[students] are more willing to put more effort into performing well academically” when they feel supported and cared by their teachers.

### **EC Teachers’ Strong Commitment to Students’ Physical, Emotional, and Mental Wellbeing**

While many would assume that the previous theme supporting learners academically to this extent was the primary role of teachers, it is critical to note that much of the lived experiences shared by teachers and students related to connecting and building relationships went far beyond mere concern for students as learners. Rather, early college teachers and students alike acknowledged the complex realities of the lives of students and the powerful ways that teachers connected to students, demonstrating tremendous care. Early college teachers worked to support students holistically to provide them with resources endeavoring to meet their physical, emotional, and social needs. The experiences and stories of the teachers and students evidenced the following themes: (a) EC teachers and students created family-like relationships; (b) EC teachers endeavored to promote social and emotional wellbeing through timely advice and intervention; (c) EC teachers joined students through tragic and intense personal and out-of-school realities; and (d) EC teachers and students formed longitudinal and familial connections. These themes and experiences of participants diverge significantly from many of the current discourses around (and assumptions about) the role and influence of teachers.

**EC teachers and students created family-like relationships.** Family is one of the first words teachers and students alike offered when asked to describe their early college experience. Follow up elicitation to this word evidenced that strong personal relationships between early college teachers and students are facilitated by small class sizes and longitudinal connections in small groups (in contexts such as the weekly focus group meetings) discussed previously. This construct is a major facilitator of the family feeling students and teachers experience in the early college context of MECHS. This longitudinal, deep, personal, and permeated support (discussed more in the following themes) demonstrated the family-like deep connections and care between teachers in the early college and their students.

Students reported that this family-like community was very motivating to a student who may not necessarily like coming to school. Jack finds the family atmosphere in the early college appealing, when he said, “I don’t know if anyone loves coming to school but I like coming to school because

this is my family outside of my family like we are all close, we all know each other, or we're all very personal with one another."

In this family-like environment, students find true friends in their teachers. Henry feels very comfortable around a teacher he regards a true friend: "I could say what I need to say or wanted to say and she wouldn't get mad... she's very open person, very easy to talk to." Like a real friend, this teacher "[is] willing to listen, willing to discuss something with you, willing to help you see, you know, help you get through it whatever it might be" and is "only the first one" Henry would want to talk to "if anything would come up with me." He noted that at the early college he had found teachers he would "feel comfortable talking to, I think they understand me, they know the things we're going through." Henry was explaining that the more personal and meaningful the bond he had developed with a teacher, the more likely it was that he would go to that teacher knowing that "they're gonna try to find the best way to solve the issue, whatever it might be." The construct of teachers helping students solve issues 'whatever they might be' is evidenced when one considers the number of experiences teachers and students described about ways that teachers endeavored to create a positive climate in the school through timely advice and intervention to support the social and emotional wellbeing of students.

**EC teachers endeavored to promote social and emotional wellbeing through timely advice and intervention.** The social worlds of high school students are complex in the early college, just as they are in any traditional context. Teachers work to mitigate those challenges by engaging actively with students and groups of peers. Ms. Madison explained that over time students have come to believe her. She said:

When I tell them something, the advice, they ask for advice often, and know that I'll tell them really what I feel like is best for them... They have a lot of respect for the school and a lot of respect for what the adults, how we try to lead them.

When students share with her concerns about their home lives and futures she feels she has their trust and assumed goodwill enough to:

...be very honest with them and say 'Oh you need to go to school, you need to get your education, this is good'; you say to the students "I know you don't like where you are, you have some resentment for your parents, the situation you are in, but either you fight that and do better or you will be just like, I mean, you will become that, you know, you have to choose."

Acknowledging that these young adult students do have choices, and that not all of those choices will be ones that the teachers would recommend, is a complicated reality for some of the teachers. Ms. Madison shared that she does not:

...want anybody else to put them down. They are your family and you will defend them and stick up for them. That's the way I am about the students. I'm not proud of them for every decision they have made, but I don't [want] anybody else talking bad about them.

The idea of not putting others down is significant in this current context of the virtual world of many schools. Like Ms. Madison, other teachers strive to preserve the emotional and physical wellbeing of their students, are familiar with the idea of cyber-bullying and the challenges of virtual spaces such as facebook.com. They take measures to monitor the conflicts flaring between students in both the actual and the virtual world. Jack, a senior, is well aware of his teachers' protective efforts to "say no-bullying....you're not gonna talk down to another student." He continued, saying:

Facebook is a big issue.... Like if you post something about somebody on Facebook, you're going to hear about it the next day from one of your teachers like "you probably shouldn't have done that." And they're not gonna let somebody else bring somebody down."

Jack further asserted that teachers also worked to ensure that students were not engaging in negative self-talk. He explained:

"Sometimes.... it is kinda annoying, but you know, [teachers say] "you're not gonna be negative even like if you're being negative towards yourself," and they'd be like 'Don't be like that,' you know, 'You don't need to be like that, just think about this.' They're good about not letting you get down on yourself.

Teachers endeavored to foster a positive school climate and facilitate connections with and between students.

**EC teachers joined students through tragic and intense personal and out-of-school realities.** Early college teachers not only attempted to promote a more kind and family-like climate within the school, they also went far beyond the school context with individual learners and shared times of tragedy or intense personal struggle. The realities of the lives of learners at the early college were not separate from the lives they lived at school. In fact, many times early college teachers became involved in the complex and at times tragic realities of the out-of-school lives of students.

According to Ms. Madison, there is no shortage of personal crises in early college students' lives:

It is just constant. I mean somebody's been raped, somebody's got issues, you know, they're pregnant, you know. Those are unfortunately the majority [rather] than the minority. Just a lot of tragic events: mom's passing away of breast cancer. [...] I had a student at the shelter home, I have a student living in a hotel right now.... They're intense.

Ms. Madison's deep involvement with her students and her knowledge of and participation in their lives was evident in her interview. She gave a rundown on her students until she ran out of breath, saying:

I have 66 students and every student has a story-M.: From Ohio. Her father drives a truck, her mother runs a daycare, she has a younger brother who applied and didn't get in. She's got a boyfriend who's got pretty much a dark side. She's highly capable, smart girl but sometimes she'll be the first to say that she didn't live up to her potential. She gets down on herself. You go down the list to the next person alphabetically. E.: Sneaks out of her house at night, has gotten in trouble before...[and she continued]...

Teachers' willingness to know students holistically and support them both inside and outside of school enabled students to turn to their teachers for help, knowing that they will "stand up for" them. The experiences of teachers and students at the early college were replete with examples which illustrate the care-filled connections of teachers and students collaborating in the face of crises and challenge. This idea of teachers 'standing up' for students was evident in the stories of teachers and students alike.

Brandy, a senior, shared how her teachers at early college encouraged her when she "had a really hard time" with the soccer coach at the district high school who she felt "isn't all that fair." Her early college teachers went to one of her games as support even though the game was not that



important and she did not even get to play. She said it felt “awesome” when her teachers came and that it evidenced that “they actually care.” This helped her get through her anger and disappointment. Later, when her grandfather passed away, her teachers helped her get through her loss. Brandy stated, “I couldn’t have done it without them.”

Ms. Madison recalled a student who asks her to break to her father the news that she is not getting her associate’s degree, a goal her family had set for her enrollment in early college. The student was afraid to tell her father this disappointing news:

She came into the school and we had a meeting. She’s going to be a credit short. She’s got 40 hours of college credit, she’s getting her high school diploma, but she’s not getting her associates degree. Her father does not know. So she gets teary-eyed just thinking about that. At some point I will have to tell her father. They’re from Ecuador, so I think that’s a big accomplishment for the father. He wants to see the associate’s degree and that’s what he thought would take place.

Another early college student recounted calling her teacher, Ms. Osborn, when she was involved in a car accident instead of calling her parents. Ms. Osborn got in touch with the student’s parents while the student stayed on the phone with her. Ms. Osborn thinks that the student called her first because “she knew that I would be there or support her or lead her where she needed to go.”

In another case of intense student conflict, Ms. Osborn recounted how one of her female students came out to her about her sexuality rather than reaching out to the school counselors or others. This demonstration of trust was significant and surprising to Ms. Osborn who said, “I was kind of honestly shocked that she would come to me at first.” Ultimately, the student ended up talking to the counselors, but it is significant to note the level of trust and vulnerability the student felt was possible with her teacher. Another teacher, Ms. Nelson recalls a student who chose to talk to her about his mother’s disapproval of his homosexuality. Ms. Nelson recalls “lots of conversations dealing with the fact that his mom is not supportive of it. He’s come to me and asked what he should do.” Students often turned to their teachers when they were experiencing dilemmas in their family and social worlds about which they needed advice and encouragement in a safe space.

Ms. Madison explains that she is as involved in her students’ lives as “a doctor on call twenty-four hours a day.” Ms. Madison’s students feel so close to her as to call her in the middle of the night for help: “They call me 2, 3 o’clock in the morning if they’re having problems, you know, text messaging, emailing.” Ms. Madison asserts “they know everything about me, I know everything about them, [their] families; I’ve been to their homes.” She recounted her involvement in a particularly tragic event in the life of one of her students whose mother died of a drug overdose:

He called here. We met him there. I took him to the funeral home. I mean there was no other family member, so I walked with him in to view his mother’s body the first time. Getting his hair cut, finding him some clothes to wear to the funeral.

The complexity of the lives of students became even more significant as they transitioned into increasingly adult roles and challenges. Since many early college teachers worked with students in weekly focus groups across three academic years, the involvement of teachers in the out-of-school complexities of learners often increased over time. Ms. Madison explained:

As they’ve gotten older, you know, different issues. Not as much of the school drama, you know: “I don’t wanna do this [assignment],” or boyfriend, girlfriend... I mean it’s gotten more mature. It’s an issue for a 15-year-old versus an issue for a 19-year-old. Some of them whose parents have kicked them out, I mean, they’re 18 and they’re on their own, so they’re trying to pay for everything,

I mean, moneywise and everything that they do. It's just increased to a deeper level. Renting homes and buying cars and much more adult type conversations. I mean real world things.

These "real world things" had significant implications for the lives and education of students. Early college teachers often found themselves supporting learners in untraditional ways. Ms. Madison explained that she had a student "who was pregnant last semester, who didn't have a ride, so I would come to school, teach a class, leave, run to go pick her up at her home, bring her back here, so she could, you know, go to class." Ms. Madison was not the only MECHS teacher who ensures that her students can come to school, picking them up and giving them a ride and driving them back home after school.

**EC teachers and students formed longitudinal and familial connections.** It is little surprise that, once established, these strong relationships continue, even beyond the years that students are enrolled in a teacher's class or even the early college generally. Henry, in speaking of one of his ongoing connections to and support from one of his previous teachers, said:

I mean it was not like you had to have her as your teacher in order to talk and help you with whatever it might be and sometimes we were just talking; it wasn't like a personal thing or whatever."

This long-term connection with students often mirrored a connection to the families of students. Ms. Madison, for example, noted that she is in constant communication with parents and that parents often call her for advice or to check on their children. She recounted, "I have told parents before 'I think you're putting too much pressure on them and they're gonna crack'" and offers them advice regarding what she would do "if this were my child." She explained, "I get probably 10 calls a day from parents. You know 'Have you seen my child? This is what they're telling me, what do you think?'" She added, "so I mean it's more than I bargained for." This final statement, taken with others, leads to the construct of the burden taken on by teachers for this type of disposition and engagement with students and families in these ways.

### **EC Teacher Taking on the Burden of Students' Out-of-School Worlds**

Through analysis of the data, it became clear that we would be remiss not to acknowledge that this type of schooling model, as it played out in the lives of at least one teacher at MECHS, was often, as stated by Ms. Madison "more than [they] bargained for." Understanding the essence of this experience is not just telling stories of the successes and hopeful stories of collaboration and family-like engagement. It requires acknowledging the burdens some teachers seemed to feel and the complexity of setting boundaries in this role.

Early college teachers are aware of the extent of commitment it takes to work in this context. Ms. Madison, who as stated before, had previously taught 12 years at another high school before coming to the early college, considered her interactions with the early college students "very emotional and very intense." She added that "it's easy to have a panic attack or get overwhelmed" due to this intensity. She further stated that the scope of the commitment required of teachers at the early college made her time teaching at a regular high school look like a part time job. "As a teacher here you put so much more into it... I mean I worked at other schools. I'm like getting the same pay as when I used to do that." It should be remembered, however, that Ms. Madison was often taking text messages and calls in the middle of the night from students.

She explained that working as a teacher at MECHS, she felt very accountable for individual student success, sharing "here I feel a lot more of a burden." At MECHS, graduating successful

students is not only seen as integral to students' future, but also to the sustainability of the early college. As Ms. Madison stated, "we have a lot riding on their success too." She explained that if students are not academically doing well or showing up for school:

You just have to keep motivating. You just have to keep pushing, as frustrating as it is. If they don't show up for five straight days, you can't say "I called yesterday." You have to keep calling and keep calling.

Ms. Madison shared that she felt some of the EC graduates owe their accomplishment to the relationships with their teachers, stating that they "would not have made it without" that connection, saying:

They wouldn't have graduated from college or even high school. Somebody's going to look back and say, "This student. Well, she wasn't a success. She didn't get her two year associates degree." They don't know her story. They don't know that she would never have gotten her high school diploma. That's something that encourages me: relationships.

Ms. Madison noted, "[students are] just as important to me as anybody in my life," and even claimed to "know everything about them." Explaining that her relationship with students grows across their years in the early college to "100% family," sharing "I mean you know them as well, you spend hours and hours together. It progresses with this group to where I say now it is 100% family." In recounting this commitment, Ms. Madison explained that her students- and her commitment to them- mean so much to her that even when a family event came up on the day she had scheduled a hike with her students, she chose to keep her commitment to her students. She stated, "they're just as important to me as anybody in my family. I would spend more time with them, you know, I've been with them, that group, for four years so I feel responsible for them as much as I do for my child." In addition to the family metaphor, she noted that she viewed her role as a coach, reflecting, "you [the teacher] are the coach and they're your team." Taken together, this theme along with the others from across this phenomenological inquiry offer a range of recommendations.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Findings from this phenomenological inquiry into the nature and experience of care-based relating in this model early college provide insights into the essence and meaning that participants make of this relationship. These findings have initial implications for policy that is created at the national, state, local, school, and classroom levels which impact the lives of the learners and teachers and the possibilities for authentic relationships. Implications are included for a range of stakeholders, and policy makers including other teachers, administrators, and families and students who are interested in authentically relationship-centered educative experiences. It should be noted, however, that while this inquiry provides critical insights, it cannot and does not represent an exhaustive depiction of a concept as broad as the role and meanings made from relationships. Additionally, the small number of participants and single school context calls for further research into these possibilities. These findings, however, do offer critical initial insights for those who are concerned about the holistic support and development of learners and who are committed to supporting teachers who view their role as much more complex and relational than merely disseminating knowledge.

## **Implications for Policies Created and Enacted by District and School Leaders**

School and district leaders have opportunities to shape a number of policies and practices to be enacted on local and classroom levels that can promote student success as well as teacher development, wellness, and retention.

**Policies promoting student success.** Findings from this inquiry include initial recommendations for structures of support— for both teachers and students— which could be implemented at the school level to foster more spaces and opportunities for the types of supportive relationships students and teachers alike cherish and at times predicate their personal and academic success. Data suggest that creating schooling contexts with smaller class size and longitudinal connections to teachers across multiple years can foster meaningful relationships that support student development and wellness, physically, emotionally, relationally, and academically. District and school administrators also shape how these resources (of time and money) are allocated and have significant ability to create structures within schools for longitudinal connections between students and a teacher through engagements such as multi-year Focus Groups (Edmunds et al., 2010), Homework Clubs (Ongaga, 2010), and intentionally smaller class sizes. Each of these were in place at MECHS at the time of this study and facilitated the critical support and relationships fostered between teachers and students. The ways that policies and practices structure time at the local school level has tremendous implications. As leaders in schools make policies and practices setting up the school day and the calendar, they can intentionally create the opportunities for teams of teachers to gather with and on behalf of students as well as carving out open opportunities during the day for teachers to gather and meet individually or in small groups with students to provide academic, social, or emotional support. These school-wide structures and policies are critical for fostering spaces where meaningful relationships of support can be made possible.

Another critical policy and practice initiative that could mitigate some of the challenges experienced by EC students and teachers is one that is increasingly incorporated in to school innovations and school reform initiatives, specifically the community school or ‘wrap around support’ design for schools. The Coalition for Community Schools estimates that over 4,000 community schools operate in 49 states and DC. The American Federation of Teachers (n.d.) promotes these “full-service schools” as “a place where teachers, families, community members and service providers can come together in coordinated, purposeful and results-focused partnerships.” These schools, and the proponents of them, situate educational and academic achievement within the larger social, economic, and political contexts in which children learn and grow. This is predicated upon the belief that learners and families who are healthy and well are more able to focus on learning. This is an echo of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943), a theory that notes that unless an individual’s basic needs are met (housing, safety, food, health, etc.), they will not be able to move toward more full self-actualization. This initiative enables schools to partner with external agencies and organizations to coordinate care structures that can address the holistic needs of families and learners. This means that services are integrated within K-12 schools which offer direct supports to families and students (often within the school day and on the school campus).

The wraparound services these community schools offer are responsive to the needs of the community members and often include preschool, primary health, mental health, vision care, and dental care, nutrition and wellness support, academic enrichment programs, summer and afterschool learning and program opportunities, mentoring, parent and adult classes (such as GED classes, ESL, vocational skills and career options awareness, post-secondary education, child development courses for parents). Additionally, wrap around services include social work, referrals to partnering external agencies for assistance, and processes and connections to respond to students and families in crisis

(American Federation of Teachers, n.d.; National Education Association, n.d.; Jones, 2014). In many ways, these structures are embodiments of Noddings' (1984, 2002) constructs of "care-about." These programs have had strikingly positive social and academic gains for learners and their families. California, starting in 1991, began a statewide initiative, the California Healthy Start grant which had significant academic impact on learners, increasing the grade point averages, standardized test scores, and behavior of students. These gains were most significant (25% in reading and 50% in math) in the elementary schools that had been considered "lowest performing." The Tulsa school district and New York City initiatives have also demonstrated significant holistic support for students and their families (Jones, 2014).

These programs also acknowledge that teachers and schools are not able to provide holistic support without structures of support and significant participation of community and external agencies. The hiring and creation of meaningful teams within the school can provide and navigate necessary wrap-around structures of support for learners. Having school counselors, social workers, and other school professionals who can create a support network for students is critical. When these school-based professionals are involved in the daily lives of learners (rather than primarily overseeing school and course scheduling, etc.) they can help link students and their families to community-based resources which could ease some of the complexities of their out-of-school worlds. These teams of school-based professionals have more capacity for community connections and to necessary support structures and providing those links and resources to learners is invaluable. Teachers rarely are well-prepared to help families find safe housing in times of domestic violence, to respond to drug-overdoses, or to find financial resources for families in times of distress.

Additionally, when there are individuals in the school who are noting patterns and trends in the community for which there is a need but no immediate services, it is much more likely that that need can be advocated for systematically within the community. When one teacher at a time attempts to address these needs alongside of students, it is difficult to find a pattern that would call for a community-based service to meet a collective need. Having others in the school with close relationships to multiple students can provide much more timely, meaningful, and relevant support for learners while identifying and working toward building support structures to meet needs that reoccur across students and time. Having these key supportive professionals coordinating family resource centers and community-oriented administrators who can connect individuals to agencies of support removes a great deal of the burden from teachers who are rarely prepared to handle these types of personal crises (Jones, 2014). Policies which promote hiring and developing of these community navigators and resource teams are needed at the school, local, and state level.

**Policies promoting teacher development, wellness, and retention.** Our findings provide further evidence that teacher commitment is a key facilitator of the engagement of students who are more likely to be vulnerable to a host of setbacks to succeeding in higher education settings. MECHS teachers' commitment to keep their students engaged by helping them overcome personal crises and by supporting them with their academic needs through care-based relating are markedly different from what some have considered a "relationship-based" approach (Alaie, 2011).

Many of the care-based relational supports teachers offered to learners at MECHS can come at a very dear price into these teachers' own sense of balance and wellness, particularly if clear and healthy boundaries are not established. The difficulty building and sustaining healthy boundaries when one believes in permeability of in- and out-of school worlds of learners is one that is not unique to one teacher or to early college contexts. While it is evident that relationships are critical, it is likely easy for teachers to feel a tremendous (and problematic) burden as if they are primarily responsible for the life trajectory of learners. This calls into question the ways that all teachers can be supported in building, maintaining, and fostering both strong relationships of permeability with

students while developing and maintaining healthy boundaries which can facilitate balance, resilience, and ability to remain longitudinally in the field in productive and truly supportive ways.

The experiences recounted by teachers of their relationships with students makes evident that teachers who are committed to this type of personally-engaged relationship do so at some (and at times an extreme) cost to their own holistic wellness and need specific and intentional structures which support them so that the toll is not so high that these committed and caring educators burn out and leave the field. Creating meaningful support structures for teachers is necessary, particularly in light of the emotional toll experienced by teachers committed to educational equity (Cantor, 1998; Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008; Curry et al., 2008; Fisher, 2009; Timmons Flores, 2007). The stressors experienced by teachers is so significant preventing the attrition of teachers by attending to their wellness, cognitive, social, and emotional needs and healthy boundaries is critical if we are to have an increasingly compassionate, caring community of educators who are able to develop and sustain their commitment to the holistic needs of each student.

School leaders and administrators can endeavor to mitigate these additional stressors by creating opportunities for authentic professional learning communities of mutual support (Cantor, 1998; Curry, 2008; Fisher, 2009), such as Critical Friends Groups (School Reform Initiative Website). These groups are spaces wherein teachers work together to puzzle out questions and dilemmas of their work and personal tensions (such as the creation of healthy boundaries). In these collaborative communities, teachers support each other and consider issues of educational equity and authentic professional learning and growth together in a context where each teacher is cared for and experiences caring and supportive challenges from others. Teachers who choose to participate in these longitudinal and mutually professionalizing learning communities are likely to find significant opportunities and support at their self-identified point of need for personal and vocational support.

These types of critical friendships could support teachers at MECHS and other learning spaces to engage in the work of (a) teaching to students' learning styles, interests, and needs, (b) challenging students to outdo themselves, (c) acquainting themselves as specific content area teachers with areas outside of their specialty so as to support learners making connections within and between content, and (d) collaborating with other teachers to consider additional ways to support students who are experiencing struggles. MECHS teachers spoke of some collaborations in the form of advisory support sessions [offered in 84% of early colleges as per Berger et al. (2010)] through which early college teachers gathered as a team with individual students to monitor, discuss, and set goals and action steps to ensure student growth and success.

### **Implications for Policy Makers at the National, State, and District Level**

Particularly during this political time as House Bills 610 and 899 have proposed that the U.S. DOE be dissolved, ESEA repealed, and more decision making power given to the states, the role of local and state policy makers in the facilitation of student achievement and wellness is even more apparent. As increased pressure for vouchers for "school-choice" promote more for-profit and private sector schools, it is even more critical for those who make policy at the district and state level to examine qualities of school "reform" which matter to the lives of the students these innovations purport to serve and to consider who benefits from recommended policies and innovations.

The facilitators of successful EC experiences have been stated by Edmunds et. al., (2010) to be (a) high expectations, (b) rigorous instruction, (c) relevant instruction, (d) relationships, and (e) social and academic supports. We argue that each of these critical factors are necessary in the formation of any policy for schools and schooling. While these words have become ubiquitous, they have simultaneously, at least in some circles, seemed more of an exhortation than an actionable and

enacted reality. The experiences from these EC teachers and students illuminated several implications for education policy and structures of schooling which potentially have merit and could be measurable, achievable, and tangible.

Research on EC and the impact on learners is overwhelmingly positive (Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010; Edmunds et al, 2010; Hall, 2008; Hoffman & Vargas, 2010). Policies and funding supporting EC initiatives can ease the transitions many students experience. Additional support to expand and develop EC programs at the national and state level can work to promote student engagement, high school and college matriculation, and foster student success through the P-16 trajectory.

This inquiry and additional research indicates that the relationships which are fostered in these spaces have been found to play a significant role in student engagement and success (Ongaga 2010; Saphier et. al, 2008; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). While, to be sure, local school and classroom-based policies and teacher practices are critical in fostering relationships, state and national policies and policy makers (who set funding structures and parameters) can prioritize support for schooling structures which support meaningful and longitudinal relationships between teachers and students (i.e. reduced class sizes, and long-term connections across academic years).

Very recently, a consortium of eight states (California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Washington) has received funding from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), to create standards for social and emotional learning across the K-12 public school trajectory (GaDOE, 2016). This intentional focus on school and classroom climate and relationship building involves department of education leadership and policy makers from multiple states to facilitate professional learning opportunities and support structures for social and emotional development of learners. It will also create a shared vocabulary for teachers, leadership, families, and students to use to promote and articulate the role of the social and emotional development as an integrated and integral aspect of academic learning in schools. In a social and political climate where a frequent adage regarding educational priorities is “What gets measured gets done,” it is encouraging that policy-makers at a range of levels are attending more significantly to the social and emotional aspects of learning, development, and effective schools. It is the hope that these conversations and priorities will continue to gain momentum and that further support for structures of schooling that can authentically foster the holistic development of all learners becomes more significantly prioritized in policy and practice, in word and deed.

### **Implications for Families and Students**

It is critical that the decisions made at this level be informed by the voices, experiences, insights, and lived expertise of learners, families, and communities. We feel that the stories and meanings shared by participants make evident that this type of public school setting attending to the hierarchy of needs of each learner (Maslow, 1943) and manifesting a deep and significant ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) through care-based relating is not only possible, but it is fostering student success and growth. Imagining schooling systems and educational models truly built on the notion that every student can learn and envisioning learning as meaningful and individualized support of the whole student is a critically different perspective from current discourses and definitions of high-stakes, standardized, and scripted curriculum (Meyers, et al., 2014). The lived experiences of participants in this inquiry indicate that when schools become spaces (a) where learners and teachers to learn about and build meaningful relationships with each other, (b) where teachers build curriculum and learning opportunities to respond to the needs of each learner, and (c) where intentional supportive scaffolds for student achievement are employed, students are likely to succeed. Such early interventions appear to be implemented extensively in early colleges resulting in

significant improvements in student learning (Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011). About 85% of over 150 early colleges in the 2006-2007 academic year provided tutoring with 16% making it a requirement for all of their students (Berger et al., 2010).

In our conversations with state and local policy makers, school administrators, and teachers, it has become increasingly clear that when families and communities demand a specific set of actions on behalf of learners, these changes are much more likely to occur. Therefore, families and communities play a critical role in helping reframe schooling endeavors to spaces with wrap-around services that support the holistic development of each child, rather than a narrow focus on academic achievement to the detriment of focusing on the physical, emotional, and relational wellbeing of learners.

### **Implications for Educational Researchers and Advocates of Responsive Education**

Phenomenological approaches to understanding experiences can provide us with critical information about how to move forward with intention. As Colaizzi (1973) stated, "Without thereby first disclosing the foundations of a phenomenon, no progress whatsoever can be made concerning it, not even a first faltering step can be taken toward it, by science or by any other kind of cognition." (p. 28) Therefore, we hope that this inquiry can join the research of others (Cravey, 2013; Miller et al., 2013; Ongaga, 2010; Saphier et al., 2008) to further elucidate the experience of hopeful, mutual, and care-based relating which is simultaneously confirming (Noddings, 2016) and fosters whole-person centered innovations in learning and teaching. We hope the voices of the students and teachers in this inquiry inspire others, as they inspired us, to continue to place central importance on the relationships built and fostered in classrooms between students and teachers. Acknowledging the reality of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), for learners, teachers, and all of us, is an important reality as we consider educational spaces which can, in fact, provide equitable educative experiences for all.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

We hope that highlighting the experiences of these students and teachers and the ways that their relationships shaped their personal, professional, and academic endeavors can contribute to the critical conversation about the purpose and role of schools, schooling, teaching, and learning in community. The teachers and students in this study made evident that these relationships were a critical precursor and vehicle for accomplishing their shared goals of academic growth and achievement while providing personalized support for students' emotional and academic needs. Teacher and student commitment, developed through and manifested in these relationships, was facilitated by small class size and other design features and served to help students become and remain engaged in their learning and helped them develop holistically in the face of personal and academic obstacles.

Students and teachers have made evident that these relationships ensure that every student has her holistic needs attended to in ways that support her engagement and readiness to focus on learning. Their voices can provide insights to policy makers, other educators, administrators, teachers, family and community members, and students as to how to better attend to and work toward the holistic growth and development of all students and teachers. Returning, once again, to Noddings, she challenged each of us, those who shape policy and practice broadly, in local contexts, and who work in and influence schools and schooling to choose to relate meaningfully and ethically in care-based relationships in which we confirm and encourage each other. Noddings, however, noted that it will be clear what matters to us when we (and others) observe our own actions (O'Toole, 1998). Much more research must be conducted to explore the effects of the extraordinary



commitment it takes to build and maintain care-based relating as a pivotal component of instructional spaces and the measures that must be taken to ensure that (a) every student has access to holistic development, and that (b) every teacher has the support s/he needs to engage in and sustain commitment to and within this emotional and engrossing work. This work is the work of equity and is work each of us must strive to engage in and promote. It will take all of us, in our varied roles in educational policy, research, and practice, to understand the nature and essence of these relationships and to ensure that these supportive and mutual connections become a lived-out reality for each learner across school contexts and learning trajectories.

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## **Appendix A: Tentative MECHS Interview Questions**

### **Questions for Students:**

- a. How would you describe your experience being a student here?
- b. What words would you use to describe your relationship with teachers here at MECHS?
  - a. Tell me more about that. What makes you think that?
- c. How would you describe your (relationship with) teachers at MECHS?
  - a. How does the teacher show s/he cares about you?
  - b. Can you describe an event when you felt cared by your teacher?
- d. When you think about your relationship with teachers, what makes you happy? What makes you sad?
  - a. Can you answer using a story?
- e. How is your relationship with MECHS teachers different from the ones you had in your previous school(s)?
- f. In what ways are your relationships different from those of your peers in other high schools?
- g. (Juniors/Seniors) How have your relationships changed since you came here?
- h. What role do you think your teachers have in your learning?
- i. What are some of the things your teachers should do for you to be more successful?
- j. What should your teachers do for you to be admitted to the college you want to go?

### **Questions for Teachers:**

- a. How would you describe your experience teaching here?
- b. What words would you use to describe your relationship with MECHS students?
  - a. Tell me more about that. What makes you think that?
- c. How would you describe your (relationship with) students at MECHS?
- d. When you think about your relationship with students, what makes you happy? What makes you sad?
  - a. Can you answer using a story?
- e. How is your relationship with MECHS students different from the ones you had in your previous school(s)?
- f. In what ways are your relationships different from those of your colleagues in other high schools?
- g. How does grade level of the student(s) affect your relationship with them?
- h. What role do you think you have in your students' learning?
- i. What are some of the things teachers should do for students to be more successful?
- j. What is your role in students' admission to college?

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