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## *Identifying the Personal Benefits of Increasing Your Efficacy With African American Students*

One day, during the period when I was writing this book, I met an African American security guard at a local elementary school. As I passed by a school while finishing the last mile of my morning walk, she said, "Hello." For some reason, that simple hello led to an extensive conversation. At first, we discussed weight loss and exercise. I learned that she'd recently lost a lot of weight and would soon be celebrating her 50th birthday. We also spoke about other things and realized that we had more in common than an interest in fitness. In fact, it turned out that we had several mutual acquaintances. When the conversation turned to the topic of education, she began to speak about her own K-12 school experiences. The story that she shared illustrates the enormous amount of power that teachers wield over students and how both good and bad teachers can have long-term effects on them. I asked her if I could borrow the notepad

and ink pen that were protruding from the pocket of her uniform shirt so that I could take notes in order to share her story with you. In the next section, you'll read Nyala's story (throughout this book, I have changed the names of the individuals whom I describe), and then, I'll ask you to complete a related exercise.

### **NYALA'S STORY: "I GAVE UP BECAUSE EVERYBODY HAD GIVEN UP ON ME."**

Nyala grew up in Alabama, in a large family that included her parents and her 13 siblings. At first, she and her siblings attended all-black schools. Although the U.S. Supreme Court had outlawed segregation in public schools four years before her birth, at the time when she started elementary school, segregation was still common where she lived. But things were about to change. Ten years after the Supreme Court's ruling, local government officials finally decided to comply. Therefore, when Nyala entered third grade, it was at an "integrated" school instead of at the all-black school where she had spent the previous three years. At the new school, she learned two powerful lessons. These lessons were not part of the formal curriculum that her teacher taught, but rather from the "hidden curriculum."

The first lesson that she learned was that in spite of their dark skin, she and her six African American classmates were invisible. Nyala learned this after repeatedly raising her hand, only to find that her teacher never saw it—or at least pretended not to. No matter how long Nyala held her hand in the air, her teacher never called on her.

The second lesson she learned was that she had been subjected to inequality of educational opportunity. It turned out that at the all-black school, the books were old, outdated, and less challenging than the ones at her new school. "We actually didn't have the material to keep up," Nyala explained. "I was a better reader than most of the kids at the black school," she said. However, at the predominantly white school, she realized that she and her African American classmates had weaker reading skills than their white peers. According to Nyala, "In the black school, the books didn't prepare us for the books they were reading in the white school, [but] in the white school, they never let us [the African American students] read [orally] in class."

Before long, Nyala was feeling horrible about both herself and school. Because of her weak reading skills, she said, "I felt like a jackass! That school didn't fertilize my mind or my spirit. The teacher didn't care about me. I gave up because everybody had given up on me."

Whereas having poor reading skills and being ignored by her teacher caused Nyala to become apathetic about school, a more pressing and more embarrassing issue also contributed to her hatred of the predominantly white school. Because the teacher refused to call on her

when she raised her hand, Nyala often urinated on herself. Being ignored meant that the teacher never knew when her hand was raised to *answer* a question, or when it was raised to *ask* an important question: for permission to go to the restroom. "When I put my hand up and my head down, that meant that I had wet on myself," she remarked. "I wasn't the only one." Evidently, her African American classmates were also forced to wet their pants periodically, and her siblings in other classes at that elementary school met the same fate. "My mother had 14 kids," Nyala explained, "and six of us were in elementary school. My brothers and sisters were having the same problem. I had to learn to control my bladder." The situation reached a terrible climax on the day when one of her brothers, a fifth grader, actually had a bowel movement on himself in class. "That's when my mother went to the school. They called her to bring clothing for my brother because he smelled. That's when she finally spoke up."

During the 1950s and 1960s, it took a lot of courage for a black mother to stand up for her children at a predominantly white school in a state that had earned a reputation for being racist, segregated, antiblack, and violent. But Nyala's mama was fed up with how her children were being treated by teachers. So on that day when she was notified that her son had defecated on himself, she grabbed an extra pair of clothing and marched down to the schoolhouse. She wanted to make something clear to the educators at that school: "Ain't nothing wrong with my children!" she announced. "They just learn slower." This mother wanted educators to stop viewing her children as individuals who weren't capable of learning and students who deserved to be mistreated by adults at school. What she did took a lot of courage, but her love for her children and her desire to see them get a decent education were stronger than any fear that the Jim Crow south had instilled in her.

When she recounted this story to me, Nyala didn't say how the school officials reacted to her mother's declaration. She did, however, explain how it affected her: It changed her self-concept. "I always knew that I wasn't dumb," she said. Despite the fact that she had begun to view herself as a "jackass" at school, deep down inside, she knew that she had the potential to be a good student. After all, at the all-black school, she had excelled at reading, and if she had been given a chance to read orally at the white school and improve her reading skills, perhaps she could have become one of the top readers in her class. Her mother's words to school officials on that day reminded her of something that she had once believed strongly: She wasn't dumb.

Even though her mother's words had reminded Nyala of her own potential, apparently they did little, if anything, to change the way that white teachers at her elementary school viewed her. They continued to view her as deficient, and the labels that they placed on her had dire consequences. When she completed elementary school and went to junior high school, Nyala was placed in a special education class.

Being placed in special education, especially as an older student rather than one in elementary school, could have resulted in several negative consequences for Nyala. She could have become so disillusioned that she eventually dropped out of school. She could have become a rebellious discipline problem who made the teacher's life a nightmare. She could have started believing that her mother was wrong and the teachers were right; perhaps she really was dumb after all. But in Nyala's case, being placed in special education turned out to be a huge blessing in disguise. And the main reason was the teacher.

Like most of her elementary school teachers, Nyala's seventh-grade teacher was a white woman. But this teacher had a different mindset about African American children. She believed in their ability to learn, and she used teaching strategies that reflected this belief. "She taught all of the subjects," Nyala said proudly. "That's when I finally caught up, because she taught at a slower pace. That's when I caught up in spelling and in reading." But more than anything, that seventh-grade teacher reawakened Nyala's belief in her potential to be a good student.

On the day that Nyala and I met, as we stood chatting in front of the elementary school where she worked, she remembered that seventh-grade teacher with great fondness and gratitude. One of the long-term consequences of this teacher's skill-development work with Nyala was that it permitted her to pursue her dream of becoming a sheriff's deputy. When she enrolled in the sheriff's academy, tackled the course work, and took exams, Nyala relied on some of the very strategies that the seventh-grade teacher had taught her. Later, when Nyala graduated and joined the sheriff's department, she knew that her fate might have been very different if she hadn't had that one special teacher—a white woman in Alabama who rose above the status quo in order to empower African American children by giving them a good education.

Many years later, Nyala retired from the sheriff's department and decided to work as a school security guard. Her current job is to protect the children and adults on campus from harm. She made it clear to me that just as she is concerned about their physical safety, she is equally as concerned about the quality of education that the children at the school are receiving. She realizes that even though her own K–12 school experiences occurred decades ago, during a different era, today, countless African American children still encounter teachers who think and behave like her former elementary school teachers at the predominantly white school did.

### EXERCISE 1A: REFLECTING ON NYALA'S STORY

1. What are the three most important points that you learned from Nyala's story?

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12 Beliefs, Mindsets, and Baggage

2. In your opinion, how might Nyala’s brother’s accident in fifth grade affect his future school experiences and his attitude about school?

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3. Describe your most embarrassing school-related experience, when it occurred, your age at the time, and how it affected you.

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4. Before she was placed in a seventh-grade special education class, Nyala had had negative experiences with white teachers. In your opinion, what made her seventh-grade teacher—a white woman living in a notoriously racist environment—behave differently than Nyala’s previous white teachers?

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5. If you had been one of Nyala’s elementary or middle school teachers, what do you *think* she would tell other people about you?

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6. If you were one of Nyala’s former teachers, what would you *want* her to say about you as she described the effect that you had on her?

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7. How can Nyala’s story help you to become a better educator of African American students?

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As I said previously, one of the reasons I wanted to share Nyala’s story with you is because it illustrates the fact that teachers wield enormous power over students. Teachers can encourage, motivate, and empower students enough to make them believe that the sky is the limit to what they can accomplish at school and in life. Teachers can also damage students to the point that students become apathetic about school and believe that

they aren't capable of excelling academically. The next exercise will require you to think about your own K–12 school experiences and to describe the teachers who had a positive impact on you and those, if any, who had a negative one.

**EXERCISE 1B: YOUR BEST AND WORST TEACHERS**

Think back to your own K–12 school experiences.

1. How many outstanding, powerful, and life-changing teachers did you have?

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2. Who were your outstanding elementary school teachers?

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3. What qualities or characteristics made them outstanding?

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4. Who were your outstanding middle school teachers?

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5. What qualities or characteristics made them outstanding?

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6. Who were your outstanding high school teachers?

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7. What qualities or characteristics made them outstanding?

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8. Now, review your answers to the first seven questions. What were the similarities among your best elementary, middle, and high school teachers?

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9. How many negative, damaging, and/or uncaring K–12 teachers did you have?

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10. Who were your worst elementary school teachers?

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11. What qualities or characteristics made them bad teachers?

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12. Who were your worst middle school teachers?

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13. What qualities or characteristics made them bad teachers?

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14. Who were your worst high school teachers?

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15. What qualities or characteristics made them bad teachers?

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16. Now, review your answers to the second set of questions. What were the similarities among your worst elementary, middle, and high school teachers?

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17. What can you learn about good teachers from this exercise?

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18. In terms of your own teaching efficacy, especially with African American students, how do you think you measure up to your best teachers?

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19. In terms of your teaching efficacy, especially with African American students, how similar or different are you from your worst teachers?

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20. In your opinion, what made your outstanding teachers decide to become good teachers?

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21. In your opinion, what made your worst teachers decide to become bad teachers?

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I hope that you had numerous outstanding K–12 teachers and few, if any, bad ones. Unfortunately, researchers have found that high-achieving students tend to report that they had more influential teachers than low-achievers report.<sup>1</sup> However, both groups report a dismally small number: less than two for low-achievers and about three for high-achievers.<sup>2</sup> It is a sad commentary on our educational system. In fact, often, when I ask educators, parents, and other individuals who attend my workshops how many powerful, influential, life-changing K–12 teachers they had, many indicate that they didn’t even have *one*. In other words, during their entire K–12 education, not one teacher made a positive impact on them.

One of the questions that I have wondered about for a long time is, “Why do some teachers make a choice to be effective and others choose to be ineffective?” Of course, some ineffective teachers don’t even realize that they are ineffective and never make a conscious decision to become so. Nevertheless, ineffective teachers damage students. Having several bad teachers in a row can be extremely detrimental to students because teachers are the most important in-school factor that affects student achievement.<sup>3</sup> The question of why some



teachers choose to become ineffective has been on my mind for a long time, especially in regard to ineffective teachers of African American students. I wonder if they started out being idealistic and optimistic and then lost their zeal over time. Did discipline problems cause them to lose their desire to reach all students? Was it burnout? Did they become hopeless about their ability to truly help African American students succeed at school?

## MY THEORY ABOUT INEFFECTIVE TEACHERS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

The question of why some teachers knowingly or unknowingly choose to become ineffective with African American students led me to formulate a theory: I believe that many teachers may subconsciously or consciously *choose* to become ineffective with African American students because they don't see the *payoffs—the personal benefits*—for themselves. After all, most people have to have a motive for the actions that they take. Let me explain what I mean by sharing a related personal example.

Have you ever gotten the bright idea to start a new diet, a new exercise regimen, a new hobby, a new class, or some other endeavor? If so, like most of us, you probably had a lot of enthusiasm and determination—at least at the beginning. But before long, you might have found that your enthusiasm was slowly—or maybe even quickly—disappearing. When this occurred, you had two choices—to stick to your plan anyway, or to throw in the towel and quit. Chances are that you were more likely to hang in there and reach that goal if you could convince yourself that the goal was worth achieving. If you had a fan club, or group of strong supporters, to encourage and cheer you on, the attainment of that goal probably became much easier. I had a similar experience many years ago during my quest to earn a doctorate.

At the time when I decided to go back to school, I was a teacher at a predominantly Latino, underperforming high school. I was married, and I had three school-age children. Upon hearing of my plans, one of my colleagues laughed in my face and implied that I was crazy. Others merely laughed behind my back and waited for me to fail. One extended family member told me that I was probably wasting my time.

In spite of this negativity, I enrolled in a local doctoral program and embarked on what I expected to be an adventurous educational journey. One semester later, I was bleary-eyed, sleep-deprived, and feeling that the naysayers may have been correct. This *was* crazy, and I didn't need the extra work and stress added to an already hectic life. So I decided to quit. To my surprise, a group of cheerleaders—my husband, my children, and a few friends—told me that I couldn't quit. And when they finished rattling off all of the ways in which I would benefit from finishing what I'd started, they had convinced me that I should remain in school. Their belief in me and their words of encouragement gave me the fuel that I needed to stay on course. However, each semester they had to “refuel” me. In the end, I earned the doctorate, and I am

grateful that my family and friends were instrumental in helping me to keep the personal benefits in mind each time that I seriously considered quitting.

Even though I often thought about quitting school during that time, the *personal benefits* of earning a doctorate were always clear to me. First, earning the doctorate would qualify me to apply for tenure-track teaching positions at colleges and universities. Second, earning the doctorate would permit me to have more time to pursue research projects that interested me. Third, I would have time to write the books that I never seemed to have enough time to write. Fourth, I would be in a position to share what I had learned with educators by conducting workshops and presenting my work at conferences.

Conversely, in the case of teachers who choose to become ineffective, I wonder if they have either forgotten or have never known how they can benefit personally from being excellent educators of African American students. The theory that I developed led me to create a simple questionnaire called the “What’s In It for Me?” questionnaire. Before I tell you more about what I learned from distributing this questionnaire to a group of educators, I would like you to complete the following exercise.

**EXERCISE 1C: IDENTIFYING THE PERSONAL BENEFITS OF BEING AN EFFECTIVE EDUCATOR OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS**

1. How would you rate your level of effectiveness with any African American students that you currently have or with those with whom you have worked in the past?

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2. What specific examples can you provide to justify the rating that you gave yourself?

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3. List at least three ways in which you would personally benefit from becoming a better educator of African American students.

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Hopefully, you were able to complete the previous exercise without too much difficulty. I also hope that you were able to think of at least three ways that you would personally benefit from increasing your efficacy with African American students. In the next section, you will read about how another group of educators responded to a similar exercise. As you’re reading their

responses, compare and contrast your responses with theirs. Then, go back to your list and add any new benefits that you hadn't already thought of.

## THE "WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?" QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

In March 2008, I gave a presentation to 108 educators and individuals who were affiliated with Minnesota schools in some capacity. More than half of the participants were white, and 32% were black. Although only 12% of the participants were currently working as classroom teachers, 64% had worked as educators in one capacity or another. In fact, 60% had been educators for at least five years, and nearly 30% had been educators for more than 20 years (see Appendix A for more information about the conference participants). Most were currently working as specialists who trained teachers to better serve a multiethnic student body.

At the beginning of the presentation, I asked the participants to complete the "What's In It for Me?" questionnaire that I had developed. In addition to providing background information about their age group, job, and race or ethnicity, participants were instructed to "List three ways in which you would *personally* benefit from working more effectively with black students." The two most frequently cited answers were "It will benefit society and/or the community," and "I would understand students and their parents better." The next most frequently cited answer was "I would feel better about myself." One fourth of the respondents said, "I would become a better teacher," 20% said that "It would improve students' futures," and 20% said "I will have better relations with these students." Less than 10% of the participants said that becoming a more effective educator of African American students would "decrease discipline problems," "improve students' skills," or "improve test scores." (See Appendix B for more information about the participants' responses.)

The personal benefits that the conference participants cited can be grouped into two main categories: those that would directly benefit the educators, and those that would indirectly benefit them. For example, the participants who said that becoming more effective educators of African American students would benefit society and the community were citing ways in which the educators would benefit indirectly. As members of society, these educators realized that if they provided their African American students with a quality education, it could be a win-win situation: A good education increases the likelihood that the students will grow up to become hardworking, law-abiding adults instead of becoming a financial drain on taxpayers by getting caught in the "prison pipeline" or stuck in an endless cycle of poverty. Similarly, respondents who said that becoming more effective with African American students would benefit the educators by "improving students' futures" were also citing an indirect and long-term benefit. By providing African American students with

a quality education, they could position students to pursue their dreams of getting good jobs and/or attending college. In Nyala's case, her seventh-grade teacher's hard work enabled Nyala to pursue her dream of enrolling in the sheriff's academy and to eventually get the job of her dream. Evidently, the educators who cited long-term indirect benefits might have had a mindset that was similar to that of Nyala's teacher.

Four of the six most commonly cited personal benefits were direct benefits. Educators who said that increasing their efficacy with African American students would "help them better understand students and parents" and those who said it would permit them to have "better relations with these students" could utilize what they learned immediately and, thereby, improve their pedagogy and relations with African American students and parents. Respondents who said that increasing their efficacy would "help them feel better about themselves" were alluding to the well-known adage "When I do good, I feel good." Knowing that they were working effectively with African American students might help them to sleep better at night because they were not choosing to shortchange students academically or perpetuate inequality of educational opportunity in the way that some of Nyala's elementary school teachers did. Another direct benefit, that of "improving my teaching," could clearly benefit teachers directly, swiftly, and on a short-term and long-term basis. Obviously, the respondents who cited this benefit realized what so many researchers—including myself—have tried to tell educators for years: "If you become an outstanding teacher of African American students, all students will benefit!" Moreover, teachers who choose to do this will develop better and more effective teaching skills.

Both categories of responses consisted of *intrinsic rewards*, nonmonetary rewards. In fact, researchers have found that "teachers are motivated more by intrinsic than by extrinsic rewards," and many teachers "are primarily motivated by intrinsic rewards such as self-respect, responsibility, and a sense of accomplishment."<sup>4</sup> Hopefully, your responses to Exercise 1C also reflect that you are mainly motivated by intrinsic rewards in order to make a lifelong positive impact on *all* of your students, including the African Americans.

## POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND

The main point that I would like you to remember after reading Nyala's story and completing the exercises in this chapter is that, as an educator, you will make some type of impact on students. The questions to always keep in mind are "Am I making the type of impact that I want to make?" and "Am I making the type of impact that I will be proud of in the long run?" The book *Who Mentored You? The Person Who Changed My Life: Prominent People Recall Their Mentors*<sup>5</sup> is a good example of what I'm saying.

The book consists of stories that 40 well-known individuals shared about the people who contributed to their success. Twenty-one of the

celebrities, including three African Americans—the late actor Ossie Davis, the actor James Earl Jones, and the singer Jessye Norman—mentioned that one or more of their K–12 school teachers had made a lasting, positive impact on them. In fact, nearly 30 teachers were mentioned in the book. These celebrities told poignant stories about the specific ways in which various teachers had helped them to overcome difficulties, empowered them, and played a role in their success.

However, as I was skimming the book, I couldn't help but notice that many of the celebrities—including six African Americans—never said that even one teacher had made a positive impact on them. I wondered whether, if given the chance, these celebrities would have shared horrific stories about teachers who might have actually damaged them or, at the very least, underestimated their potential. The fact that so many of them couldn't even say that one teacher had contributed to their success should remind us of two very important points: (1) It is possible to overlook greatness in students without realizing it, and (2) one day, we may regret that we didn't go out of our way to try to reach certain students. Today, for example, I wonder how many former K–12 teachers of the celebrities in the book wished that those very same celebrities would mention their names in an acceptance speech. On the other hand, how many teachers beamed with pride when they saw their names cited in the book *Who Mentored You?* because their former students wanted the world to know what phenomenal teachers they were? What a wonderful *personal benefit* to receive so many years after they *chose* to become outstanding educators.

Although the theme of this chapter is that there are personal benefits in choosing to become an outstanding educator of African American students, I hope you will also remember the following points:

- Even when the personal benefits aren't obvious to you, all students—including African Americans—deserve an outstanding education.
- Sometimes, you might not ever see the fruit of your labor: how well the students that you have invested so much time and energy into turned out as adults.
- There are direct benefits for you in choosing to become an outstanding educator of African American students.
- There are indirect benefits for you in choosing to become an outstanding educator of African American students.
- Many years after you have chosen to become an outstanding educator of African American students, you might receive an unexpected confirmation that your hard work wasn't done in vain.

Let me illustrate this last point by sharing another short, personal story with you. During the summer of 2008, I received an e-mail that underscored the message that I'm trying to convey to you in this chapter. One of my former high school students, an African American male, e-mailed me in order to

thank me for all of my hard work on his behalf. Throughout the years, I had often wondered how he was doing and prayed that he had turned out well. So when I received the e-mail, I couldn't wait to speak with him by telephone.

A few days later, the much-anticipated telephone conversation occurred. He told me that he was raising his two young sons and was engaged to marry a wonderful woman. Although he had gone through a difficult divorce, he wanted to make sure that his sons had a supportive family and developed good academic skills. As I listened to him describe his life, tears formed in my eyes because I remembered how difficult his high school years had been as a result of problems in his home life. Nevertheless, I and several other teachers had tried to mentor him, and I encouraged him to use education as a means of improving his future. Apparently, our hard work paid off; when we spoke by telephone, he was close to finishing the requirements to earn his master's degree! He had also been instrumental in encouraging his younger brother to attend college, and he had big plans for his sons.

At the end of the conversation, I reflected on how well this young man had turned out. I was grateful to God that the work and effort that I and several other high school teachers invested in him had paid off so well and that I had been blessed enough to hear the good news about his progress. Although I invested the same amount of energy, time, and effort into countless other K-12 students, I will probably never hear "thank yous" or updates from them. That's just a fact of life. However, even though I will never hear from most of them, the bottom line for me is that I know that I tried to do my very best—in spite of the many mistakes that I made along the way. The fact that I tried to make a positive impact on my former students makes me feel good about the work that I've done. In other words, I'm still reaping a personal benefit—an intrinsic reward—in the form of feeling good about how I *chose* to use my time in the classroom and the power that I had as a teacher.

In the chapters that follow, you will read stories about other educators who chose or chose not to become outstanding educators of African American students, and the related consequences. But before you read the next chapter, please complete one final exercise that I designed to help you remember the main points of this chapter.

**EXERCISE 1D: UPDATING YOUR “WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?” LIST**

1. Now that you have read Chapter 1, review the list that you wrote for Exercise 1C. Rewrite the list below, and then, add additional ways that you would personally benefit from increasing your efficacy with African American students.
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
  - d.
  - e.
  - f.

Whenever you feel like quitting, or feel that your work is in vain, or that you aren’t making any progress with your African American students, revisit the list that you wrote for Exercise 1D. Then, think of the positive experiences that you have had with one or more African American students, and refuel yourself. Seeking support from others can also be helpful. The next section can help you do this.

2. Make a list of individuals who can become your own personal cheerleaders during the times when you feel discouraged. This list can include positive family members, effective teachers of African American students, supportive administrators, mentor teachers, and others.
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
  - d.
  - e.

3. On New Year’s Day 2008, one of my former graduate students died at age 47. For several years, this African American mother of four, high school teacher, and track coach had battled ovarian cancer. One week after she died, I spoke at her funeral about the positive impact that she’d had on me. After returning to my seat in the crowded Baptist church, I listened as speaker after speaker spoke about the ways in which she had affected their lives. The stories that resonated with me the most were those shared by several of her former high school students. If several of your African American students attended your *homegoing* (a euphemism for “funeral” that is used in many black churches), what would you want them to say about you?

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4. Based on what you learned from this chapter, what, if any, changes do you need to make in order to become the type of educator whom your African American students will speak well of and remember with fondness, respect, and gratitude?

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### **GROUP ACTIVITY FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COURSE WORK**

1. Ask 10 administrators and teachers at your school site or at a local K–12 school, “What are the personal benefits of becoming a better educator of African American students?”
2. Analyze their responses.
3. Compare and contrast their responses with your own.
4. Explain to the rest of the group what you learned from this activity.
5. As a group, determine how you can use this information to empower educators at the participating schools.