

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY THAT EXAMINED THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGH  
SCHOOL TEACHERS WHO BUILD SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS  
THAT ENCOURAGE AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS TO GRADUATE

by

Tressa Matthews

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2020

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY THAT EXAMINED THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGH  
SCHOOL TEACHERS WHO BUILD SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS  
THAT ENCOURAGE AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS TO GRADUATE

by Tressa Matthews

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2020

APPROVED BY:

Sharon Michael-Chadwell, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Gail Collins, Ed.D., Committee Member

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers who have created supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate. The theory guiding this study was the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) as it explains the psychological needs of students to encourage persistence toward high school graduation. The central question guided the research in describing the experiences of high school teachers who have created a supportive classroom environment at high schools with high graduation rates for African-American students in Southeastern Michigan. The study sought to determine the experiences of teachers who have built a supportive classroom environment that supported competence, autonomy, relatedness among the students to encourage engagement. The purposeful and criterion sampling by use of a survey endured the participants have experienced the phenomenon. Interviews, a journal prompt, and focus groups provided triangulation of data to describe the essence of the experience. Data analysis was completed by hand coding the data into themes. The study found that the participants use relationships, collaboration, and positive reinforcement to motivate and engage African-American students. All three of the themes provided a rich thick description of the experiences in the classroom that motivate African-American students to persevere.

*Keywords:* Self-determination, competence, autonomy, relatedness, engagement, high school graduation

## **Dedication**

This research is dedicated to my three children Jalen, Justin, and Saniya. This work seemed impossible when I dreamed it yet here it is. I pray each of you go after your dreams and see them realized. There is no ceiling God cannot break. You are the reason that I continue to strive for excellence. I love you to the moon and back.

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I must acknowledge God for answering every prayer I lifted up throughout this process. God gave me the words, the strength, and the energy to keep going. Only by God's grace could I have survived with reduced sleep while continuing to teach and care for my children and husband. I am forever in awe of God's faithfulness.

I would like to acknowledge my family. I must thank my husband Kris for standing in the gap when I needed time to write. Kris, thank you for helping me focus on what is most important. I also want to thank my parents for their continued support. Dad, you not only told me I could do anything, but you believed I could do anything. You believed so I did too. Mom, you are my best friend. Thank you for reminding me to relax. I also want to thank my friends and pray warriors who prayed for me when I needed it most.

I would like to thank Dr. Jennifer Banks and Dr. Robert Martin for giving me hope and advice throughout this process. Thank you for taking my calls and calming my fears. I am sure I would have fallen apart without your support.

Thank you to my chair Dr. Sharon Michael-Chadwell. I appreciate all of your honest and constructive feedback. You have been a positive voice throughout this process. Your encouragement helped me believe I would finish. I would also like to thank my methodologist Dr. Gail Collins. Thank you for being straight-forward and always giving feedback to ensure this was a good study.

## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .....	3
Dedication .....	4
Acknowledgments.....	5
List of Tables .....	11
List of Abbreviations .....	12
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	13
Overview.....	13
Background.....	13
Historical Background .....	14
Social Background.....	16
Theoretical Background.....	17
Situation to Self.....	20
Problem Statement .....	21
Purpose Statement.....	22
Significance of the Study .....	23
Research Questions.....	24
Central Research Question.....	24
Guiding Question One .....	25
Guiding Question Two.....	25
Guiding Question Three.....	25
Guiding Question Four .....	26
Definitions.....	26

Summary .....	27
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	30
Overview .....	30
Theoretical Framework .....	31
Related Literature .....	34
Graduation Gap .....	34
Opportunity Gap .....	37
Motivation, Engagement, and High School Graduation .....	40
Self-Determination in the Classroom .....	42
Engagement .....	46
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy .....	52
The Supportive Classroom .....	55
Teacher Preparedness for Urban Education .....	57
Teachers in Suburban Schools .....	59
Peer and Parental Involvement .....	61
Summary .....	61
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS .....	64
Overview .....	64
Design .....	64
Research Questions .....	67
Setting .....	68
Participants .....	69
Procedures .....	70

The Researcher's Role.....	71
Data Collection .....	72
Interviews.....	73
Journal.....	75
Focus Group.....	76
Data Analysis .....	78
Trustworthiness.....	79
Credibility .....	79
Dependability and Confirmability .....	80
Transferability.....	80
Ethical Considerations .....	81
Summary.....	81
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	83
Overview.....	83
Participants.....	83
Rose.....	85
Lynn .....	85
Kim .....	86
Amanda.....	87
Maria.....	87
Thomas.....	88
Kate.....	88
Carter.....	89

Sara .....	90
Andrea.....	90
Results.....	91
Theme Development.....	92
Research Question Responses.....	116
Summary .....	123
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION .....	125
Overview.....	125
Summary of Findings.....	126
Discussion.....	130
Relationship to Empirical Literature.....	131
Relationship to Theoretical Literature .....	135
Implications.....	137
Theoretical Implications .....	137
Empirical Implications.....	138
Practical Implications.....	140
Delimitations and Limitations.....	141
Recommendations for Future Research .....	142
Summary.....	143
APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER .....	159
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER.....	160
APPENDIX C: SCREENING SURVEY .....	161
APPENDIX D: AFTER SURVEY EMAILS .....	162

APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORM .....	163
APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .....	165
APPENDIX G: JOURNAL PROMPTS .....	166
APPENDIX H: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS .....	167
APPENDIX I: INVARIANT HORIZONS.....	168
APPENDIX J: RESEARCHER JOURNAL.....	169
APPENDIX K: AUDIT TRAIL.....	171

**List of Tables**

Table 1. Participant Biographical Information .....	84
Table 2. Sub-Themes of Teacher-Student Relationships.....	93
Table 3. Sub-Themes of Colloboration.....	104
Table 4. Sub-Themes of Positive Reinforcement .....	107

### **List of Abbreviations**

Michigan School Data (MSD)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Teachers have the ability to not only teach content, but encourage students to persevere (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). Gay (2018) stated, “While ‘caring about’ conveys feelings of concern for one’s state of being, ‘caring for’ is active engagement in doing something to positively affect it” (p.48). A teacher’s care for the whole child affects the student’s academic achievement (Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The classroom environment created by the teacher displays the level of support and allows the students to feel competent, autonomous, and relatedness (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Specifically, African-American students often feel marginalized in the classroom making the classroom environment a key component of academic success (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Mahatmya, Lohman, Brown, & Conway-Turner, 2016). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers who have created supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate. This chapter provided a detailed explanation of the background of the problem and connects the theoretical framework to the problem and purpose of the study. The research questions were stated and included literature to support the need to answer the central and guiding questions. The key definitions are provided at the conclusion of the chapter.

### Background

Interventions to close the graduation gap span the last century (Rury & Hill, 2012). The graduation gap has fluctuated over the last few decades, but the closing of the graduation gap remains elusive (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Students who do not graduate from high school

face unemployment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for job growth (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Kim, 2015). Many studies agree that the classroom environment created by the teacher plays a significant role in students' persistence in high school (Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Zaff et al., 2017). Additionally, a teacher's ability to build a supportive classroom environment to promote self-determined motivation by fostering competence, belonging, and autonomy could narrow the graduation gap.

### **Historical Background**

The graduation gap began when segregated schools for freed slaves opened after the civil war (Levine & Levine, 2014). The system of separate but equal schools perpetuated the achievement gap. Schools were not equal as the African-American schools worked with less educated teachers and outdated textbooks (Rury & Hill, 2012). Many African-American children attended school for four months or abbreviated hours so that the children could assist with farming (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Between 1930-1940, many African-American students were attending schools that did not offer a high school diploma. The students had a weak educational foundation in elementary school which made high school too difficult. Many students dropped out to assist the family with farming or earning money (Rury & Hill, 2012).

In the 1940s, the graduation gap began to narrow as African-American educators in African-American schools began to focus on school and classroom reform to help students persist. The schools began to focus on relationships and nurturing environment to help the students feel a part of the school (Juergensen, 2015; Rury & Hill, 2012). Juergensen (2015) stated, "The history of African American schooling in the South is saturated with accounts of student-teacher relationships that motivated and inspired students primarily through high expectation" (p. 54). Teachers believed in the students' ability to graduate and created

environments to foster competence, belonging, and autonomy which resulted in higher graduation rates (Juergensen, 2015; Rury & Hill, 2012). The schools were known for focusing on academics and support from qualified teachers instead of vocational skills (Rury & Hill, 2012). Simultaneously, the push by teachers at African-American schools for equal education led to integration (Juergensen, 2015). However, as Caucasian families moved to new areas to avoid integration, the schools left in urban areas lost funding and resources. The integrated school became segregated by property lines. The caring environment with teachers who believed in African-American students diminished, and the graduation gap grew (Rury & Hill, 2012).

The migration of Caucasian families imposed a new segregation across America (Horsford, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Many large cities became home to predominantly African-American families (Horsford, 2011). The property values in the urban areas dropped and funding for schools diminished (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Although segregation was illegal, property line segregation increased (Darling-Hamond, 2011; Horsford, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Furthermore, with the restructuring of schools African-American students lost access to African-American teachers (Rury & Hill, 2012). The post-integration teachers struggled to understand the needs of the students in the classroom. Instruction was left unchanged even though the demographics in the urban classroom had changed considerably (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The lack of realization of the poor quality of education led to many African-American students being labeled with learning disabilities (Horsford, 2011). After integration many educators posited that the cultural differences hindered African-American students from learning and the issue could not be resolved (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Many of the misconceptions about African-American students continue today as

the reason for the achievement gap remains elusive (Darling-Hammond, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)

### **Social Background**

Decades after integration, schools remain segregated because of property lines. Many African-American students attend predominantly African-American schools (Horsford, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Due to the socioeconomic status of the African-American neighborhoods, the students attend schools with less resources and inexperienced teachers (Howard & Milner, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The difference in funding between an urban predominantly African-American school and a suburban Caucasian school often exceeds \$8,000 per student (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Rendon (2014) found that students attending a predominantly African-American school face a higher risk for dropping out. However, the graduation gap between African-American and Caucasian student is not as simple as socioeconomic status since when accounting for socioeconomic status Caucasian students still have higher academic success (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Rendon, 2014). The gap in academic achievement not only exists for African-American students in suburban schools, but the gap gets larger as the poverty level of the district decreases (Diamond, 2006; Gordon & Cui, 2018).

After integration, African-American students lost connection to the school (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rury & Hill, 2012). The segregated African-American schools were a part of the African-American culture and community (Rury & Hill, 2012). The post-integration schools, although often segregated, presented a cultural mismatch which alienated the students and the parents. Cultural mismatch identifies the cultural gap between the school and home (Horsford, 2011). African-American parents often rejected communication with teachers as past

experiences with racism tainted the parents view of the school (McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown, & Lynn, 2003). Students encountered cultural conflict as the students often felt pressure to reject their culture in the classroom (Horsford, 2011). In many cases, the cultural conflict continues as schools fail to recognize the need for students to feel a sense of belonging (Gay, 2018; Horsford, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The lack of connection leads to a lack of persistence in high school (Shernoff et al., 2016).

High school dropouts face lower wages, unemployment, and poverty (Rendon, 2014). Today, many African-American students who drop out of school report feeling disengaged (Mahatmya et al., 2016). The lack of engagement begins when students are in elementary school and increases as students continue to feel disconnected in high school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Peguero, Ovink, and Li (2016) found that African-American students feel disconnected and the lack of social bonds put African-American students at an increased risk for dropping out of high school. However, attachments at school protected African-Americans from dropping out significantly more than White students. Connections at school are critical to the persistence of African-American students at urban, suburban, and rural schools (Peguero et al., 2016). The classroom environment created by teachers can assist students in connecting with the teacher, peers, and the school (Shernoff et al., 2016).

### **Theoretical Background**

Deci and Ryan (1980) developed self-determination theory from research on the drives of all humans. The foundation of the theory posits that humans desire to be self-determined. All humans have a drive to control the outcome of situations and the drive leads to intrinsic motivation. Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) expanded the theory to education. The research extended the theory into the classroom supports that teachers can use to build the

psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness which encourage intrinsic motivation. Deci et al. (1991) theorized that the social context which supports self-determined motivation would enhance non-controlled motivation even if the student lacked interest in the subject. An environment that does not support competence, autonomy, and relatedness would hinder not only motivation but also academic achievement. Self-determination theory and the components of self-determination theory supports the foundation of many studies on motivation and engagement in high schools ( Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Mahatmya et al., 2016; Zaff et al., 2017).

Self-determined motivation encompasses several forms of motivation which encourages a person to engage in an activity (Deci et al., 1991). Since intrinsic motivation references motivation for the sake of enjoying an activity, intrinsic motivation does not always represent a students' motivation to learn (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). Students may deem an activity as useful and internalize an external motivation (Reeve, 2012). Outwardly, the motivation would mimic intrinsic motivation in the way the student approached learning and engagement (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). A student may find school valuable and essential and decide to integrate motivation for school. The integration allows the student to commit to the tasks at school even when the tasks are not interesting (Reeve, 2012). Regardless, of how students achieve self-determined motivation, the basic needs of competence, autonomy, and belonging still must be met (Deci et al., 1991).

Engagement is a visible outcome of motivation (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). Engagement is a key factor in minority and low socioeconomic students dropping out of high school (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Finn (1989) studied the epidemic of high school dropouts. The research connected high school graduation to engagement. Finn used two models to look at high school

dropouts. The first model was the frustration-self-esteem model which found that when students did not believe in their ability to complete an academic task, the task led to frustration and low self-esteem. A poor performance in a class or an academic task lowered students' self-esteem and self-view. The teacher not providing proper instruction led to poor performance which led to disengagement (Finn, 1989; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). The disengagement based on the frustration-self-esteem model connects to the competence of the student. The second model was the participation-identification model. The model looked at how the student felt connected to the school. Students who participated in activities inside and outside of the classroom were more engaged. Students who felt connected to the school and peers were engaged and less likely to drop out of high school (Finn, 1989). The sense of belonging linked to engagement ties into the psychological components of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Researchers agree that motivation and engagement provide key elements that lead students to persist and graduate from high school (Fan & Wolters, 2014, Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). Guay, Rattele, and Chanal (2008) conducted a literature review and found that teachers provide the framework for students to become autonomously motivated. The quality of support from a teacher is more important for building motivation than the quantity of support. Although research focuses on strategies teachers can use to build a supportive environment and students' reactions to the classroom environment, research does not qualitatively address teachers' experiences in the classroom (Fan & Wolters, 2014, Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding the experiences of teachers who have built supportive classroom environments for African-Americans would add to the current literature.

### **Situation to Self**

As an educator with experience in a variety of settings around Southeastern Michigan, I must bracket myself out of the study. I bring my own set of beliefs about creating a supportive classroom environment; however, the participants lived experiences must dominant the study. I believe that every student can learn if given the right resources, tools, and environment. I believe that teachers have a powerful role in the success of the students in their classroom. As an African-American female and a member of the marginalized community, my set of opinions, beliefs, and biases should be bracketed out to allow the voice of the participants to be heard.

In middle school and high school, I was in a predominately Caucasian school district. Many times, I felt ignored by peers and my teachers in class. In middle school, I was not chosen for advanced classes, even though I had been in advanced classes at my previous school. I was bored and did not want to participate. My grades were decent but did not represent my ability. In ninth grade, a couple of teachers saw my potential, noticed my disengagement and pushed into my life. My teachers and parents worked together to enroll me in advanced classes. I had the confidence to engage and was motivated to do my best. I felt that I belonged and had some control over my learning. My experiences in high school motivated me to become a teacher and to conduct this study. I believe teachers' voices matter and I desire for the experiences of teachers to be told without interpretation just as I would want my story told without interpretation of the author.

An ontological assumption guides this study. There are many ways to view the classroom environment and each participant will add a unique perspective. The different perspectives will work to develop the essence of the experience of building classroom environment. Although all of the teachers work in schools with high graduation rates for

African-American students, each teacher will bring their own reality based on their experiences in and out of the classroom. The multiple realities make this study imperative to develop a common experience of teachers from different backgrounds (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The social constructivism paradigm will guide the study. I desire for the participants to construct meaning from their experiences. I believe that knowledge is constructed through experiences and I desire to understand the classroom environment from the participants' perspectives. The data collection will provide an opportunity for participants to construct their meaning relating to the experiences of creating a supportive classroom environment. The teachers have different social environments inside and outside of the schools which will impact how the teacher understands the experience of building a supportive classroom. The common essence of the experience will allow others to view the experiences through the perspectives of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

For 2016, the NCES reported that 76% of African-American students graduated from high school compared to 88 % of Caucasians students (NCES, 2018). The classroom environment created by the teacher plays a significant role in a students' engagement and motivation in the classroom and persistence for high school graduation (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Shernoff et al., 2016). Several studies indicated that teachers may use strategies such as creating a sense of community, building a sense of autonomy, and competence to increase achievement, engagement, and motivation (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). Yet, other studies focused on the need for cultural awareness in addition to the strategies for engagement and motivation (Callaway, 2017; Mahatmya et al., 2016). Waddell (2013) found that veteran teachers in urban areas focused on developing the necessary teaching skills and

committed to understanding the culture of the students. However, teachers are more likely to have low perceptions of the educational attainment for African-American students which leads to low perceptions of school connectedness and therefore low motivation and engagement (Mahatmya et al., 2016). Although numerous studies attempt to identify strategies for creating a supportive classroom environment, none give voice to teachers' experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment in schools with high graduation rates for African-American students, which could inform the practices of teachers in schools with lower graduation rates of African-American students. The problem that this study is seeking to understand is how teachers who have created supportive classrooms have been able to encourage African-American students to graduate.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers who have created supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate. At this stage in the research, the supportive classroom environment will generally be defined as the environment teachers create to foster learning and engagement, as well as support student psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and belonging (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wallace & Sung, 2017; Wang & Eccles, 2013). High graduation rates will be defined as graduation rates above the national average for all students of 84 % (NCES, 2018). The theory guiding this study is self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Self-determination theory focuses on the types of motivation and psychological needs of the individual which drive motivation.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was empirically significant as the study will seek to fill a gap of giving voice to high school teachers in their efforts to build a supportive classroom environment. Intrinsic motivation and engagement are predictors of academic achievement (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). Although studies have looked at strategies for creating a supportive classroom and the students' perspectives on motivation, there is little literature on the teachers' perspective of building a supportive classroom environment ( Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Mahatmya, Lohman, Brown, & Conway-Turner, 2016; Zaff et al., 2017). Understanding the teachers' experiences in the classroom with building a supportive environment, motivation, and engagement may provide new insight on best practices in the classroom. The perspective of the teacher will add a new layer to the research on persistence in high school and the importance of classroom environment. Superintendents, administrators, teachers, and policy makers can use the experiences of the teachers in this study to make substantial changes to the classroom environment and training for teachers creating supportive classroom environment for African-American students.

The study is theoretically significant as the experiences of teachers creating a supportive classroom environment will focus on how the environment promotes engagement and motivation. Self-determination theory provides the framework for the psychological needs of all individuals, and the study will illustrate the connection between classroom environment and the components of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Since engagement is the result of motivation, the experiences promoting self-determined motivation will also enhance the theory of self-determination (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). The study adds to the theory by describing how teachers assist students with building the components of self-determination in

schools with high graduation rates for African-Americans. Researcher will have a new perspective on the role of teachers in motivating African-American students.

Practically, the study will give administrators a view into the lived experiences of teachers who value the classroom environment as a tool to motivate all students. African-American students are more likely to have teachers that hold low expectations which leads to disengagement and lack of motivation (Howard & Milner, 2014). By understanding the experience of the teachers who use classroom environment to enhance motivation in schools with high graduation rates for African-American students, administrators, teachers, and education professors can assist other teachers in the implementation of appropriate strategies.

### **Research Questions**

This study focused on the experiences of high school teachers who created supportive classroom environments for African-American students. The study was guided by self-determination theory and focused on the way teachers created an environment for students psychological needs to be met to encourage intrinsic motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016). This transcendental phenomenological study collected data from high school teachers in Southeastern Michigan to answer the central questions and guiding questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **Central Research Question**

What have been the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers with creating supportive classroom environments that encourages African-American students to graduate in Southeastern Michigan?

Teachers have the important role of creating a classroom environment (Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The environment is a critical part of the students' perceptions which

either encourage or discourage motivation and engagement (Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Engagement and motivation support a students' persistence to graduate from high school (Cham, Hughes, West, & Im, 2014; Fan & Wolters, 2014).

### **Guiding Question One**

How do high school teachers describe experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment by building students' self-confidence in learning?

When a student believes they are competent, the student will persist during challenging tasks (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Cham et al., 2014). Teachers can increase students' feelings of competence by creating an environment where the teacher expresses a belief that all of the students can learn (Cham et al., 2014, Fan & Wolters, 2014). The question seeks to describe teachers experiences with building competence (Cham et al., 2014).

### **Guiding Question Two**

How do high school teachers describe experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment by building students' independence and offering choice?

Students have a psychological need for autonomy and self-regulation of actions (Deci et al., 1991). Teachers can support the need for autonomy by creating opportunities for the students to have choices in the classroom (Patall, Vasquez, Steingut, Trimble, & Pituch, 2016; Wallace & Sung, 2017). Students in autonomous supportive classrooms rather than controlling classrooms are more engaged in learning (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Patall et al., 2016).

### **Guiding Question Three**

How do high school teachers describe experiences with building a sense of belonging to create a supportive classroom environment?

Students desire relatedness with the teacher and peers in the classroom (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2008). The environment created by the teacher can build a student-teacher relationship and student-student relationships which encourages motivation and engagement (Ruzek et al., 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The question seeks to describe the teachers' experiences with building a sense of belonging for each student.

#### **Guiding Question Four**

How do high school teachers describe experiences with using engagement to create a supportive classroom environment?

Behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement encourages persistence for graduation (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wang & Fredericks, 2014). A caring supportive environment provides for the psychological needs to enhance self-determined motivation and engagement (Deci et al., 1991; Wang & Eccles, 2013).

#### **Definitions**

The terms listed below are important to the study and are related to the literature or theoretical framework of the study:

1. *Autonomy* – A person's self-regulation of actions and the desire to complete the actions necessary to finish a task (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2008). For the purpose of this study, autonomy is a student's interest in completing the necessary tasks to learn the content.
2. *Competence* – A person understanding how to accomplish various outcomes and having the efficacy to complete the necessary steps to attain the outcome (Deci et al., 1991). For the purpose of this study, competence is a student's belief that the content taught in the class can be learned.

3. *Culturally responsive teaching* - Teaching which uses the culture, experiences, and learning styles of the students in the classroom to create a supportive learning environment (Gay, 2018).
4. *Engagement* – The experience of stimulated learning through the act of interest, enjoyment, and cognitive processing (Shernoff et al., 2016).
5. *Relatedness* – A person feeling safe and secure in a social context (Deci et al., 1991).  
For the purpose of this study, relatedness is a student’s sense of belonging in the classroom.

### **Summary**

The high school graduation gap between African-American and Caucasian students continues to perplex educators (Zaff et al., 2017). When freed slaves opened schools after the abolishment of slavery, the education gap began (Levine & Levine, 2014). The African-American schools lacked trained educators and updated textbooks (Rury & Hill, 2012). However, decades after the first schools opened some African-American educators were able to narrow the graduation gap by focusing on relationships with the students and community. Unfortunately, integration meant less African-American peers and teachers concerned about high school graduation for African-American students (Juergensen, 2015). Despite integration laws many schools remained segregated by property lines and the predominantly African-American schools had less resources and inexperienced teachers (Horsford, 2011; Howard & Milner, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

High school graduation provides a layer of protection from unemployment and poverty (Rendon, 2014). However, many African-Americans students attend schools which place the students in cultural conflict. The African-American students feel pressure to abandon their

culture in order to connect and be successful (Gay, 2018; Horsford, 2011). The cultural conflict causes students to disconnect and disengage from the classroom and the lack of connection hinders persistence in school (Gay, 2018; Horsford, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Shernoff et al., 2016). The teacher plays a large role in meeting the needs of the students to foster motivation and engagement (Shernoff et al., 2016).

Motivation and engagement are critical components of a students' desire to complete high school (Shernoff et al., 2016; Fan & Wolters, 2014). Self-determination theory posits that people need to feel competent, autonomous, and relatedness to become intrinsically motivated to complete a task (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Teachers can create a supportive classroom environment to foster the three psychological components of competence, autonomy, and relatedness which enhance intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation leads to engagement and academic achievement (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). The importance of meeting the psychological needs of students is undisputed. However, not all teachers focus on classroom culture. The way teachers approach building a supportive classroom environment may vary. Some teachers may focus on integrating the students' culture to build autonomy and relatedness, while other teachers may focus on choice (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Mahatmya et al., 2016; Waddell, 2013). Motivation drives engagement as intrinsically motivated students engage in the classroom (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). Motivated and engaged students are more likely to persist in challenging situations at school and complete high school (Fan & Wolters, 2014, Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016).

A qualitative study will capture the perceptions and lived experiences of teachers building the supportive classroom environment for African-American students. The teachers are integral to the motivation and engagement of the students; therefore, qualitative data provided a

rich description of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Deci et al., 1991; Froiland & Worrell, 2016). A transcendental phenomenology allows the experiences of the teachers to be provided without interpretation so that the teachers perspective is clear (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In transcendental phenomenology, the researcher intentionally brackets out their lived experiences to allow the lived experiences of the researchers to shine. The process of bracketing oneself out of the data allows for a rich description of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The current study provided teachers, administrators, and education professors with and understanding of the lived experiences of teachers building supportive classroom environments in schools for African-American students.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

High school graduation provides individuals with financial and employment security (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Rendon, 2014). However, the African-American student graduation rate is 19% less than Caucasian students (NCES, 2018). Self-determined motivation leads to engagement which enhances academic outlook and graduation status (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Motivation and engagement level predict a students' persistence to complete high school (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Wang & Fredericks, 2014). Teachers can create an environment of caring and support in the classroom to assist students in building competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which are critical factors in self-determined motivation (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016).

Engagement illustrates a visible sign of self-determined motivation (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). Engagement in the classroom predicts a student's interest and desire for future educational attainment (Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wang & Fredericks, 2014). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers who have created supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate. This chapter provides details on the theoretical framework and related literature pertinent to this study. Specifically, the chapter details how the components of the self-determination theory increase the motivation and engagement of students in an effort to increase persistence toward graduation. The chapter outlines potential strategies on how teachers can increase competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Also, the chapter explains how culturally responsive teaching could be integrated into building a supportive classroom environment. Finally, the chapter connects engagement to the supportive classroom environment and motivation and concludes with a summary.

## Theoretical Framework

Motivation represents an essential component of learning (Deci et al., 1991; Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Reeve, 2012). Through motivation students can gain competence in their academic ability and increase the perceived value of learning (Young et al., 2011). Self-determination theory developed from research on how humans are motivated (Deci et al., 1991). Deci and Ryan (1980) found that all humans desire to be the driving force in the outcome of situations. According to self-determination theory all humans want to be self-determined and the desire for self-determination provides the catalyst for intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980).

According to Deci and Ryan (2008), two types of motivation explain self-determination theory. Autonomous motivation involves a person's intrinsic motivation which leads a person to complete a task without prompting. People with intrinsic motivation view themselves as the causal driver of their behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). Controlled motivation involves an external regulation which leads someone to act based on external pressure (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Reeve, 2012). External pressure forces individuals to think or behave in a way due to a reward or punishment (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Intrinsic motivation positively predicts academic achievement (Cham et al., 2014; Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016). People with high levels of intrinsic motivation persevere longer and work toward conceptual learning and mastery (Reeve, 2012; Taylor et al., 2014). Froiland and Worrell (2016) found that teaching and learning become hampered by focusing on controlled motivation. According to Froiland and Worrell, intrinsic motivation interventions increased motivation which led to higher student engagement and achievement.

Three basic psychological needs drive intrinsic motivation. Competence, relatedness, and autonomy represent needs that when met increase motivation and academic achievement (Cham et al., 2014; Deci et al., 1991; Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Reeve, 2012). Competence relates to a person's feeling of self-confidence. A feeling of competence leads a person to persist in challenges and a desire to improve in a particular area (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Reeve, 2012). Relatedness reflects a sense of belonging and community with others (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Autonomy describes a person's sense that they have the opportunity to make decisions and have the power to enact change in their environment (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). A self-determined person has the three basic needs met (Deci et al., 1991; Jenkins-Guarnieri, Vaughan, & Wright, 2015; Reeve, 2012). Students who perceive themselves as competent have a higher academic achievement and act autonomously (Guay, Rattele, Roy, & Litalien, 2010). Self-determined students persist even when challenges are faced (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Reeve, 2012; Taylor et al., 2014). Teachers play an important role in building competence, relatedness, and autonomy in students (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016). A student's desire for competence, relatedness, and autonomy are needs which remain the same across gender, culture, race, and background (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Reeve, 2012).

Intrinsic motivation relates to a person engaging in an activity because the activity interests the person, or the activity is enjoyable (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). However, in relation to school, dimensions of extrinsic non-controlled motivation can mimic the drive of intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1991). Organismic integration theory, a mini-theory evolved from self-determination theory, posits that students internalize and integrate motivation into internal motivation because of external causes (Reeve, 2012). Internalization describes a

motivation in which a person converts an external regulation to internal regulation because although the activity may not be interesting, the activity is thought of as useful and necessary (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). Internalization “proposes that students are naturally and volitionally inclined to internalize aspects of their social surroundings and to integrate some of these values and ways of behaving as acquired motivations” (Reeve, 2012, p. 154). Students desire to take the input of rules and expectations from the classroom and internalize them. The need to increase competence and relate to others drives students to internally regulate (Reeve, 2012).

Identified regulation happens when a person values an activity and has accepted the behavior because the person deems the behavior as important (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). When students see a concept or task as useful, the students are willing to internalize the task and commit to the activity even if the task is not enjoyable (Reeve, 2012). Integrated regulation is an autonomous regulation where a person deems an activity important because the outcome is valued (Deci et al., 1991). Students may commit to a task because the task is seen as a way to obtain a desired outcome such as studying for the desired grade (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). A person who has high self-determination in school may have intrinsic motivation, internalization, integrated or identified regulation which are all considered self-determined forms of motivation (Deci et al., 1991). Often internalization, integrated, and identified regulation are discussed as intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). For the sake of this study, all forms of self-determined non-controlled motivation will be referred to as intrinsic motivation. The current study will seek to describe teachers' experience with competence, autonomy, and relatedness in the classroom as strategies to increase the motivation of African-American students.

### **Related Literature**

Recently, a student's motivation in school has provided critical evidence for the reasons for lack of persistence in high school ( Fan & Wolters, 2014). Students who do not complete high school are more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, and enter the prison system (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Rendon, 2014). Dropping out of high school is a gradual process of low motivation, performance, and engagement (Fan & Wolters, 2016; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). A supportive classroom environment aids student in becoming motivated and engaged in the classroom (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). A teachers' focus on increasing competence, autonomy, and relatedness through the classroom environment may prevent students from leaving high school without a diploma (Fan & Wolters, 2014, Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016; Zaff et al., 2016).

### **Graduation Gap**

The graduation gap has existed since African-American children began formal schooling after slavery (Levine & Levine, 2014). Segregated schools often had teachers who were poorly educated and books that were outdated (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rury & Hill, 2012). High school graduation was difficult as students had weak foundations and extensive responsibilities at home (Rury & Hill, 2012). However, in the 1940s, teachers and civil right leaders understood the importance of education and leaders in the African-American community began to seek education reform (Juergensen, 2015). Teachers obtained training and school became an important part of the African American community (Rury & Hill, 2012). Teachers began to nurture the students and encourage persistence in school (Juergensen, 2015). The student-teacher relationships motivated students to connect with the school and curriculum (Juergensen,

2015; Rury & Hill, 2012). The connections resulted in higher graduation rates in African-American schools (Juergensen, 2015).

As the graduation gap narrowed, the push for equal schooling and integration exploded (Juergensen, 2015). Some leaders in the African-American community disagreed with the push for integration and predicted integration would hinder achievement of African-American students. The critics of integration argued that African-American schools need more resources but also needed to keep teachers who were committed to African-American students and the community (Morris, 2008). Integration meant fewer African-American teachers for African-American students and a more hostile environment in the classroom (Rury & Hill, 2012). However, integration laws were ineffective as Caucasian families moved to suburban areas to avoid integration (Juergensen, 2015; Rury & Hill, 2012). By 2000, 71% of African-American students attended predominately African-American schools with teachers with less experiences and fewer opportunities for college preparatory classes (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Unfortunately, as some leaders in the African-American community predicted integration hindered the narrowing of the graduation gap (Morris, 2008).

Today, inequity in schooling persists as many African-American students live in areas with lower property values; therefore, the students also attend schools with less funding and resources (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) stated, "The quality and quantity of the curriculum varies with the 'property values' of the school" (p. 54). The property address determines not only physical property but also intellectual property which links to a lack of resources for African-American students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). African-American students continue to have a disadvantaged education even after desegregation (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The lack of resources

and funding hinders students from having quality teachers in the classroom (Howard & Milner, 2012). Integration gave every student the right to attend any school regardless of race (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Rury & Hill, 2012). However, school district lines and property values in areas with quality schools perpetuates segregation (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Schools remain segregated, and discrimination in diverse schools persists (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). However, the current segregated schools lack the caring environment which aided the narrowing of the graduation gap in the 1940s (Howard & Milner, 2012; Rury & Hill, 2012). Property line segregation affects the high school graduation rates as students in predominantly African-American schools have high rates of dropping out of high school (Rendon, 2014).

Race and social class are stated as the largest factors in high school dropout status (Storer et al., 2012). However, middle-class African-American students still lag behind in standardized test scores and graduation status (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Peguero et al., 2016; Storer et al., 2012). African-American students in affluent predominantly white school districts fail to close the graduation gap, but African-American students in affluent districts with high numbers of African-American students do have a higher rate of graduation (Storer, 2012). The discrepancy in educational attainment have caused researchers to consider the school environment and the environments effects on student achievement (Diemer, Marchand, Mckellar, & Malanchuk, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Storer et al., 2012). The racial climate of a school affects how students interact with peers and the teachers (Diemer et al., 2016). The current desegregation system focuses on keeping European-Americans in the school system and leaves African-American students without a sense of control over the intellectual property of the school (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The perceived tense racial climate

prevents African-American students from connecting to school (Diemer et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The lack of connection increases students' risk for dropping out of high school. (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016).

The graduation gap presents a larger problem of future employment and financial stability (Rendon, 2014). Regardless of the socioeconomic status African-American students graduate from high school at a lower rate than Caucasian students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Rendon, 2014; Storer, 2012). For African-American students, whether the location of the school is urban, rural or suburban does not affect the graduation gap (Peguero et al., 2016). Disengagement begins early in the school career of African-American students and persist throughout high school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Storer, 2012). The school and classroom environment are key components of the persistence of African-American student (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). Teachers are critical as the classroom environment provides the support for competence, belonging, and autonomy (Fan & Wolters; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016).

### **Opportunity Gap**

The achievement gap, teaching deficits, and discrimination culminate in an opportunity gap (Milner, 2012). The idea of an opportunity gap reframes the achievement gap to look at the lack of opportunities that impede the achievement of African-American students (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner, 2012). Simply looking at test scores does not adequately address the issues. Schools use a standardized test to quantify the gap between races when the students do not have access to the same quality of teachers or learning materials (Milner, 2012). Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that the achievement gap actually represents an education debt. The debt has compiled from years of poor educational practices in

areas serving minorities. Instead of focusing on the achievement gap educators should focus on fixing the issues that cause the opportunity gaps in the educational system (Milner, 2012).

Color blindness, cultural conflict, myth of meritocracy, low expectations, and context-neutral mindsets frame the opportunity gap. Color blindness hinders students from being relevant in the classroom. Educators should understand that past experiences with race come into the classroom with each student (Milner, 2012). Teachers often take a color-blind approach and do not address culture in the classroom. The classroom that lacks connections to the students' culture, risks alienating students (Flores, 2007; Milner, 2012). Students fail to build a sense of belonging or relationship with the teacher and often feel misunderstood (Chapman, 2014). The lack of recognition of cultural differences leads to cultural conflicts where students do not feel they can express their culture or students face discipline for behavior representing their culture. The magnification of the opportunity gap happens under the myth of meritocracy which pushes the idea that anyone can achieve if they work hard enough. Educators perpetuate the myth of hard work without accounting for opportunities available to only some students. Focusing on hard work ignores the discrimination and barriers that hardworking minorities face which often cripple efforts to succeed (Milner, 2012). The myth of meritocracy ignores the basic need for competence and autonomy that African-American students need to engage in the classroom (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2015)

The lens of low expectations is another component of the opportunity gap (Milner, 2012). African-American students often take low track courses even if test scores demonstrate the ability to move to a higher track (Flores, 2007). African-American students disengage when teachers have low expectations and the expectations hinder belonging, autonomy, and competence (Chapman, 2014). Also, African-American students receiving high scores in one

school when the same work would not be acceptable in some predominately European-American schools highlights low expectations (Flores, 2007). Pendergast, Nickens, Pham, Miliarexis, and Canivez (2018) found that teacher have lower expectations for the of racial minority students' ability to complete homework. The expectations of the teacher in the classroom drive the work produced by the student. Students miss opportunities to learn and grow when the teacher expects low results. Students will meet the expectations of the teacher (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012). Low expectations not only prevent self-determined motivation as teachers do not promote competence, but also widens the opportunity gap (Chapman, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012)

Lastly, context-neutral mindsets frame the opportunity gap. Similar to color blindness educators must recognize the difference in the social context of the community (Milner, 2012). Standardization seeks sameness; however, the contexts of the educational setting differ (Milner, 2012). Predominately African-American schools have teachers with less experience, low retention, lack of proper certification, and higher absenteeism (Howard & Milner, 2014; Milner, 2012; Storer et al., 2012). Additionally, teachers are not trained to understand the social contexts of the students' life outside of school which influences behavior, motivation and engagement in school (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012; Storer et al., 2012). The test scores indict the student without looking at the situation and opportunity given to the student. The opportunity gap provides a unique lens to view the achievement gap among students (Milner, 2012). An exploration of the achievement gap should use the framework of the opportunity gap. The opportunity gap for African-American students means that African-American students lack access to educational opportunities from kindergarten to twelfth grade (Davis & Palmer, 2010;

Milner, 2012). African-American students do not have the same access to quality education (Davis & Palmer, 2010).

### **Motivation, Engagement, and High School Graduation**

The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) reported the 2016 graduation rates for African-American students were 76 % compared to 88 % for Caucasian students. The graduation gap presents a long-term problem for African-Americans including living below the poverty line and unemployment (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Rendon, 2014). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) individuals without a high school diploma face lower weekly wages and higher unemployment rates. There are many predictors of dropping out of high school such as low grades, boredom, and lack of connection to the school (Wang & Fredericks, 2014; Zaff et al., 2017). African-American students perform poorly on standardized test and drop out of high school at a higher rate than Caucasian students (Howard, 2015; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). Studies have shown that motivation and engagement are predictors of high school graduation (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Zaff et al., 2017).

The process of students disengaging from school occurs over an extended period and may begin as early as elementary school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). However, teachers hold a significant role in promoting factors to increase motivation and engagement (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Zaff et al., 2017). Teachers can promote motivation by building a supportive environment in the classroom (Zaff et al., 2017). On the other hand, when African-American students feel the teacher discriminates based on race or presents an unsupportive environment, students have lower intrinsic motivation and lower engagement in the classroom (Dotterer & Lowe, 2015; Vega et al., 2015). Within the same school African-American students and Caucasian student have different perceptions on the school environment with African-American

students having negative perceptions (Shukula, Cornell, & Konold, 2016). For African-American students, culturally responsive interventions to increase engagement could prevent students from dropping out (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Self-determined motivation prevents students from disengagement and promotes persistence in high school (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). In particular, students who expressed competence in math and English were more likely to persist and complete high school (Fan & Wolters, 2014). Students who feel competent have higher expectations for further educational goals beyond high school (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006). When the teacher creates the emotionally supportive environment, the student is encouraged, feels competent and persists (Shernoff, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The school and classroom environment are critical elements to improving the components of motivation which prevent students from dropping out (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Cham et al., 2014). A literature review by Zaff et al. (2017) stated, “Youths’ prior school motivation positively and significantly predicted later youth motivation in school and likelihood of graduating” (p. 453). African-American, Hispanic and socio-economically disadvantaged students lack access to the factors which promote motivation (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995; Milner, 2012; Wang & Fredericks, 2014; Zaff et al, 2017). The inequity of access furthers the gap in graduation rates in the African-American community (Zaff et al., 2017).

A student’s level of engagement predicts graduation status (Shernoff et al, 2016; Wang & Fredericks, 2014; Zaff et al., 2017). “Youth who exhibit high levels of all three types of school engagement are significantly less likely to drop out of school early and more likely to succeed academically” (Zaff et al., 2017, p. 453). Although emotional and cognitive engagement plays a role, behavioral engagement has been shown to have the most substantial effect on graduation

status (Wang & Fredericks, 2014; Zaff et al., 2017). Teachers play a role in the engagement of students through classroom environment and with the intention to increase engagement of students (Shernoff et al, 2016; Wang & Fredericks, 2014; Zaff et al., 2017). Engagement is not only vital for high school graduation, but also engagement promotes the skills necessary for adulthood (Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wang & Fredericks, 2014; Zaff et al., 2017). Since teachers play a significant role in creating the classroom environment to enhance motivation and engagement, a study examining the experiences of teachers will enhance the current literature.

### **Self-Determination in the Classroom**

Froiland and Worrell (2016) found intrinsic motivation equally crucial across race and ethnic differences in increasing academic achievement. Therefore, self-determination could address the achievement gap and assist educators in attempting to close the gap (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; . The school environment may play a role in promoting or decreasing self-determination of African-American students (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). The perceived social support predicted African-American students' academic motivation (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Shernoff et al., 2016; Young et al., 2011). Support from educators increased motivation by providing relatedness and competency which resulted in autonomy (Shernoff et al., 2016; Villarreal & Garcia, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Ladson-Billings (1997) found that when teachers treat African-American students as competent, the students displayed competence. Therefore, teachers may play a critical role in encouraging self-determination in African-American students (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wallace & Sung, 2017; Wang & Eccles, 2013).

Pugh and Tschannen-Moran (2016) used the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program to build motivation in African-American students. The program allows

students to take advanced college preparatory courses while providing the necessary support from teachers. School districts in Florida used the program to close the achievement gap. The program increased students' self-efficacy and sense of belongingness through the required teacher support. The increase in student-teacher relationship positively impacted academic motivation and achievement. African-American students in the AVID program experienced a significant increase in GPA. The program highlights the effects of detracking and the belonging component of self-determination.

**Competence.** Teacher expectations play a critical role in students' competence.

Teachers who set high expectations by incorporating rigorous content have students who engage and perform better (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Pitre, 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The competence supporting teachers expected learning, believed in the students, and the students believed in themselves (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The expectation of learning leads to students feeling competent which increases effort in the classroom (Wang & Eccles, 2013). The feelings of competence increase not only effort but enhances connectedness as the students feel emotionally supported (Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The action of the teachers' high expectations and belief in the students' ability to learn increases self-determined motivation through competence and relatedness (Cham et al., 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2013). As the students believe in their ability to be successful, the students begin to have high expectations for future educational attainment (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Wang & Fredericks, 2014). Students are more likely to graduate from high school when the students feel competent (Fan & Wolters, 2014).

In a classroom environment which supports competence, the teacher uses challenging yet doable tasks. The teacher carefully scaffolds lessons and provides positive performance feedback to demonstrate the belief in the students' ability to accomplish the task (Chou &

Tumminia, 2017; Deci & Ryan 1991; Shernoff et al., 2016). Scaffolding the lesson includes connecting the task to prior learning (Pitre, 2014; Shernoff, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Students will connect the new task to previous learning which encourages a sense of confidence in completing the new task (Wang & Eccles, 2013). Students are more likely to strive for mastery of the content when teacher incorporate challenging tasks with the interests of the students (Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Taylor et al., 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Teachers can also offer a choice of tasks based on the ability of the student, so each student feels challenged at their level (Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Throughout the lesson, if the teacher offers assistance without giving detailed instructions on how to complete the task and informal feedback the student may feel more autonomous and competent (Deci et al., 1991; Shernoff et al., 2016).

**Relatedness.** Students desire a sense of belonging in the classroom (Chou & Tumminia, 2017; Deci et al., 1991; Froiland & Worrell, 2016). Teachers have the opportunity to ensure every student connects with the community in the classroom as students need to have security from the teacher and the classroom community (Chou & Tumminia, 2017; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The teacher is a role model who should model the expected level of respect. The teacher should expect respectful peer-peer relationships and student-teacher relationships (Shernoff et al., 2016). The peer interactions are critical to the student feeling comfortable and ready to express themselves freely (Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The teacher may need to integrate social skills into the classroom to help the students learn to have positive peer experiences (Field & Hoffman, 2012; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The teacher may need to problem solve peer issues with students and be aware of

peer preferences. Cooperative learning groups are one way to continue to teach content while assisting students with social skills and relatedness (Field & Hoffman, 2012).

When a teacher demonstrates perceived genuine care for a student, the student is more likely to feel a sense of belonging (Patall et al., 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). As the teacher builds a rapport with the students, the students begin to feel safe (Shernoff et al., 2016). The students may become motivated and engaged to learn the content even if the topic is uninteresting (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). The emotional support of the teacher effectively increases relatedness when the student is in a noncontrolling environment (Deci et al., 1991; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The comprehensive environment including peer relationships and teacher emotional support encourages self-determined motivation (Deci et al., 1991; Patall et al., 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Student-student and teacher-student relationships are strengthened when the teacher used cooperative learning groups and focuses on the classroom as a community (Reeve & Halusic, 2009).

**Autonomy.** Opportunities for choice in the classroom support autonomy in the classroom (Chou & Tumminia, 2017; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Pitre, 2014; Wallace & Sung, 2017). Teachers can incorporate choice in the daily task management and by allowing students opportunities to own the learning in the classroom (Wallace & Sung, 2017). An autonomy-supportive teacher offers opportunities to make choices and focuses on autonomous thought processes (Chou & Tumminia, 2017; Wallace & Sung, 2017). The autonomy support in the classroom increases motivation, interest, and engagement (Shernoff et al., 2016). Patall et al. (2016) found that for African-American and Hispanic students in the science classroom, daily interest in the course mediated by autonomy support linked to cognitive engagement. The autonomy and emotional support engaged students and increased self-determined motivation.

However, Wallace and Sung (2017) found that some at-risk student found autonomy supportive actions as stressful and believed the actions were criticism instead of support. Teachers may need to consider the environment and gauge the students' readiness for autonomy.

Emotional support may be another avenue to increase autonomy in the classroom (Quinn, 2017; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Emotional support in the classroom builds student-teacher relationships and increases relatedness for students (Quinn, 2017; Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The support not only increases relatedness to the teachers but also peer relatedness (Quinn, 2017; Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). A teacher who expresses care, concern, empathy, and respect for students provides emotional support (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). The positive classroom environment builds relatedness which is necessary for students to sense belonging in the classroom (Ruzek et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The supportive classroom incorporates autonomy support. When a classroom provides emotional support through independent tasks and opportunities to build relationships, students become motivated and engaged (Ruzek et al., 2016). The behavioral engagement and motivation built from emotional support encourage persistence in high school (Cham et al., 2014). A classroom which supports autonomy assists student in understanding the relationship between academic behavior and academic outcome (Reeve & Halusic, 2009).

### **Engagement**

Researchers have linked intrinsic motivation and engagement (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). When a student is engaged in academic tasks, the student demonstrates their intrinsic motivation to learn (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). Engagement in the classroom increases achievement and disengagement leads to a lack of achievement. Student engagement depend on a teacher meeting the students need for autonomy, competence and relatedness

(Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2016). An autonomy-supportive classroom meets students need and increases engagement. However, a controlling classroom environment causes conflict and frustration which decreases motivation and engagement (Jang et al., 2016). Engagement is broken into three dimensions of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement (Cham et al., 2014; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Behavioral engagement denotes the academic behaviors of participation, homework, and effort. Cognitive engagement denotes the students' desire to learn and process content. Lastly, emotional engagement denotes a student's emotional connection such as interest or boredom (Shernoff et al, 2016). All the dimensions of engagement are critical to the learning process (Roorda et al., 2017; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wang & Fredericks, 2014). As with intrinsic motivation, engagement will increase persistence when the basic needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy are met (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

By building an emotionally supportive classroom which foster competence, autonomy, and relatedness, teachers enhance motivation and engagement (Wang & Eccles, 2013). Therefore, the factors that promote intrinsic motivation promote engagement (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). The teacher as the owner of the classroom environment must create a community of support (Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Fredericks, 2014). Teacher support not only helps students feel more competent, but also helps students with emotional and cognitive engagement (Pan et al., 2017; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The social support from a teacher helps students internalize and integrate the expectations of the teacher which enables engagement (Pan, Zaff, & Donlan, 2017). The behaviors of supportive teachers who increase engagement are similar to the behaviors which increase motivation (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Teachers who foster engagement provide clear expectations, build

relationships, provide students with decision-making opportunities, and tailor content to student interest (Pan et al., 2017; Shernoff et al., 2016). The teacher-student relationship is key as the relationship can re-engage a disengaged student as the teacher attempts to understand the life of the student (Pan et al., 2017).

Engagement connects the teachers' lesson and the students' learning. Teachers can support the connection between curriculum and learning by focusing on strategies to increase engagement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). A teacher supporting engagement builds relationships and continue to show concern for a student when the student disengages (Quinn, 2017; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Many times, teachers not focused on engagement will remove care for a disengaged student which cause the student to become more alienated (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Engagement supportive teachers view unmotivated students as a challenge which can be overcome with the correct strategy. The teacher will give more support through relationship building, student interest, and constructive feedback (Quinn, 2017; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). If the teacher notices that students are unengaged, a supportive teacher is flexible and will adjust the lesson and tailor the curriculum to the student's interest (Quinn, 2017). The supportive strategies increase all three types of engagement with an increase in attendance, academic progress, and student interest (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Quinn, 2017).

Shernoff et al. (2016) found that environmental complexity, the combination of environmental challenges and support, had a significant effect on student engagement. Although students needed environmental challenges for academic intensity, environmental support had a strong enough relationship with engagement to increase engagement without challenging tasks. However, as part of culturally responsive pedagogy, African-American students need rigor, connection to culture and the real world as components to increase achievement (Gay, 2018).

Several studies focus on the dimensions of engagement and found that teacher-student relationships predict behavioral engagement, relevant task predicts cognitive engagement, and supportive environment predicts both behavioral and emotional engagement (Roorda, Jak, Zee, Oort, Koomen, 2017; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The factors of autonomy, competence, and belonging which increase intrinsic motivation also increase the three dimensions of engagement (Wang & Eccles, 2013).

Studies have reported that African-American students are not as engaged as Caucasian students (Chapman, 2014; Voight et al., 2015). However, the classroom environment often is not supportive or challenging for African-American students (Sciarra & Seirup, 2008). Banks (2016) found that Black students in the math classroom experienced a desire to disengage when the classroom environment was not supportive. The students felt the teachers had lower expectations, and the work in the classroom lacked rigor. On the other hand, some studies have reported African-American students perceiving teachers as having high academic expectations and low support. The students feel the teachers expect the students to complete the work but do not desire to offer the necessary support for the students to engage and be successful (Cornell, Shukla, & Konold, 2016; Konold, Cornell, Shukla, & Huang, 2016). The African-American students' perception of lack of caring by teachers occurs at many schools regardless of the racial demographics or socioeconomic status of the school (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016). African-American students perceive the school and classroom discipline to be unfair which leads to a toxic academic environment resulting in lower engagement and achievement (Konold et al., 2016). The most successful environment for students to engage in learning has supportive teachers, strong student-teacher relationships, and high academic expectations (Cornell et al., 2016; Konold et al., 2016).

Sciarra and Seirup (2008) found that emotional engagement does not affect achievement for African-American students. Although Caucasian students need emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement to succeed in school, for African American students, emotional engagement did not have a significant effect. Sciarra and Seirup (2008) believed that past experiences with racism caused African-American students to develop coping strategies to suppress their need for emotional engagement. The students focused on behavioral and cognitive engagement to drive their desire to succeed. The African-American student, unlike the European-American student, must develop strategies to overcome racism before starting the learning process. Other studies contradict research that engagement varies by race, students engaged and were motivated to learn in classrooms with teachers who supported and encouraged the students (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Studies show that engagement and motivation are the same regardless of race. The same motivators for engagement such as relevant task, competence, and belonging increased engagement (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Either way, research is clear that teachers have a vital role in the level of engagement and motivation of students in the classroom.

**Behavioral engagement.** Wang and Eccles (2013) found that teacher-student relationship predicts behavioral engagement. Students desire to participate in learning tasks is related to the students' sense of belonging. Therefore, a teacher building relatedness increases not only self-determined motivation but also behavioral engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2013). As teachers focus on creating a supportive classroom environment through clear expectation, academic assistance, and rapport with students, the students develop a connection with the teacher and school (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The students engage in the classroom tasks and are more likely to complete

academic tasks at home (Finn & Zimmer, 2012) Students react to the care of the teacher by becoming behaviorally engaged in the classroom (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Shernoff et al., 201; Wang & Eccles, 2013).

**Emotional engagement.** Emotional engagement is closely tied to behavioral engagement. Similar to behavioral engagement, the teachers' role in the classroom plays a key role in increasing emotional engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Quinn, Hemphill, & Heerde, 2017; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Relatedness and autonomy enhance a student's emotional engagement. A student's sense of purpose and choice may encourage the student to connect the student to the academic task (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2013). As the teachers connect the learning to the students' interest, the students emotionally engage (Wang & Eccles, 2013). Quinn et al. (2017) found that relatedness was the main contributor to emotional engagement. Students emotionally engage when the student feels connected to the teacher and peers in the classroom. The ability of the teacher to help each student connect and feel a sense of belonging affects the level of emotional engagement (Quinn et al., 2017; Wang & Fredericks, 2014).

**Cognitive engagement.** Research on cognitive engagement is inconsistent (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Quinn et al., 2017). Cognitive engagement is difficult to measure and often relies on self-reporting. The effectiveness of cognitive engagement on academic achievement is inconclusive (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). However emotionally engagement may lead to cognitive engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Quinn et al., 2017). Teachers can increase competence through student inquiry, questioning, problem-solving, and connection to students' interest which may promote cognitive engagement (Quinn et al., 2017; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Teachers creation of meaningful learning experiences is critical to motivation and engagement (Finn &

Zimmer, 2012; Quinn et al., 2017; Wang & Eccles, 2013). According to self-determination theory students become intrinsically motivated to learn when the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met even when the content is not interesting (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012).

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Culturally responsive teaching incorporates the dimensions of engagement and motivation while emphasizing the need for culturally relevant teaching. Gay (2018) defines culturally responsive teaching as “using cultural knowledge, prior experience, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). Unlike other research, culturally responsive teaching argues that when considering the engagement and motivation of African-American students the culture and race of the student matters (Gay, 2018). Culturally responsive teachers view culturally responsive teaching as an obligation to the student to create an environment that not only promotes cultural competence but allows the students to learn and grow as an individual (Gay, 2018; Warren-Grice, 2017). The teacher recognizes that culture affects every area of a student’s life including how the student learns (Gay, 2018).

Often African-American students face cultural mismatch as the social culture the student experiences at home does not align with the school culture (Gay, 2018; Horsford, 2011; Warren-Grice, 2017). The students feel conflict as the teachers insist on behaviors which conflict with the students’ culture at home (Gay, 2018; Horsford, 2011). A teacher who is unaware of the importance of culturally responsive teaching may have good intentions as they push the student toward the majority culture instead of highlighting the culture of the student, but the effort of the teacher may build resentment and hinder learning (Gay, 2018). In addition to creating

environmental support and challenge, building competence, autonomy, and belonging, culturally relevant teachers build cultural competence. Cultural competence represents a student's ability to engage comfortably in their culture (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Student engagement occurs because of support and curriculum that acknowledges and highlights the students' culture and is sensitive to cultural differences. Teaching which effectively motivates and engages all students is culturally responsive teaching (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

Culturally responsive teachers use knowledge about students' background to increase academic achievement (Gay, 2018; Warren-Grice, 2017). Similar to pre-integration when African-American teachers connected the school and community environment to engage students, culturally responsive teachers bring the students' culture into the classroom (Gay, 2018; Rury & Hill, 2012; Warren-Grice, 2017). Teachers focus on providing not only academic support but also building a sense of community in the classroom and the school as a whole (Warren-Grice, 2017). The cultural gap is closed as the teacher demonstrates a commitment to respecting the diversity in the classroom (Gay, 2018; Voight et al., 2015). Respect for diversity includes a belief in the academic ability of the students, developing a community and sense of belonging, and offering choice based on the culture of the students in the classroom (Gay, 2018; Horsford, 2011; Voight et al., 2015). Culturally responsive teaching aligns with the principles for enhancing intrinsic motivation and engagement (Gay, 2018; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995)

Competence builds intrinsic motivation. In culturally responsive pedagogy, competence building derives from high expectations from the teachers (Gay, 2018). When teachers have low expectations, the students fail to achieve, and African-American students feel inferior when the teacher views the students' potential as inferior to the other students. The attitude and behavior of the teacher in the classroom often determine the academic outcome of the students (Wang &

Hughley, 2012). Teachers who are not culturally responsive focus have a deficit mindset and believe the students have learning deficits which hinder learning (Gay, 2018; Milner, 2012). Callaway (2017) found that teachers in urban districts who had a high teacher self-efficacy believed the teacher held power to challenge students and in essences build competence. Conversely, in one study 64 % of teachers had low perceptions and therefore low expectations for the educational attainment for African-American students. Teachers with high cultural awareness held high expectations for educational attainment (Mahatmya et al., 2016). When students are treated as competent by teachers, students believe in their competences and behave as competent students (Ladson-Billings, 1997). Therefore, many researchers have argued that building competence for African-American students does require culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Scott, 2017).

Culturally responsive teachers create a caring, supportive environment where the teachers celebrate and integrate cultural differences into the curriculum. The culturally supportive environment leads to engagement and a sense of belonging. Cultural teaching encourages academic achievement and engagement in the classroom. The cultural teaching and understanding build the teacher-student relationship which increases student learning (Callaway,2017; Gay, 2018). Teachers who integrate students' culture and create a culturally safe environment have higher levels of students' engagement (Callaway, 2017). Teachers who are not culturally responsive teach while only considering their culture and background. The lack of understanding of the cultures represented in the classroom creates an environment of cultural conflict. The result is a classroom environment where the teachers try to push the student toward the teachers' culture, and the student may work to have a voice in the classroom.

The tense classroom environment leaves the student feeling disrespected and disengaged (Milner, 2012).

Culturally relevance curriculum promotes cognitive engagement of students as the student connects the material and feels the teacher values the students' culture. The lack of connection in the curriculum to the African-American culture and contribution to society hinders students' cultural competence and therefore the student's engagement and academic success (Gay, 2018; Milner, 2012). Often African-American students have reported a feeling the need to disconnect from African-American culture to learn and connect with the teacher. The teachers push for sameness sends a message to the student that the student should follow the majority culture instead of their own culture (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Milner, 2012). In contrast, integrating a student's culture into the curriculum builds connection, and engagement (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

### **The Supportive Classroom**

The supportive classroom fosters motivation and engagement (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004; Wallace & Sung, 2017). Supportive classrooms focus on autonomous motivation rather than controlled motivation paying close attention to the needs of the students (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Wallace & Sung, 2017). A teacher provides autonomous support by providing opportunities for students to create intrinsic motivation by having a sense of control in the classroom (Reeve, 2006). The supportive classroom environment recognizes student needs and works to meet the needs in a nurturing fashion (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Reeve et al., 2004). The students in a supportive classroom are more engaged and motivated (Reeve et al., 2004). On the other hand, students in a controlling classroom environment display signs of low motivation and engagement (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Reeve et

al., 2004). Teachers are more familiar with controlled motivation and often feel forced to use controlled motivation to keep up the pressure of standardized testing (Reeve et al., 2004). However, with proper training and intention teachers can create a supportive classroom environment to foster motivation and engagement (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Reeve et al., 2004; Wallace & Sung, 2017).

The interaction between the student, the student's needs, and the classroom environment influence the student's motivation (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Reeve et al., 2004). The classroom environment will either support or discourage motivation in the students (Reeve, 2006). A supportive environment will meet the students' psychological needs and encourage motivation and engagement (Reeve, 2006; Shernoff et al., 2016). A controlling motivation hinders the students' autonomy and discourages engagement and motivation (Reeve, 2006). Teachers build a supportive classroom use the students' interests, competence, and preferences to create lessons that engage the students and nurture intrinsic motivation (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Reeve, 2006; Reeve & Halusic, 2009). The teachers' language in the classroom informs the students without attempting to control behavior. Positive affirmations for competence inform the student of the teachers' belief in the student's ability (Reeve, 2006). The teacher views a lack of motivation and engagement as a solvable problem, and the teacher remain flexible in the possible solutions (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Reeve, 2006).

Teacher creating supportive classroom environments understand the importance of explaining the value of the task (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Reeve & Halusic, 2009). Students connect with the material based on interest and value to either integrate or internalize the regulation of the motivation. The students understand the importance of engaging in the task and put effort into completing the task (Cheon & Reeve, 2015). Culturally responsive educators

recognize when students need to connect the content to their culture. African-American students may benefit from a supportive classroom that allows for the integration of the culture of the students (Gay, 2018). The connection of the content to the students' environment and culture aids in the students understanding of the value of the task (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

### **Teacher Preparedness for Urban Education**

Despite the links between culturally responsive teaching and engagement and motivation, teachers are unprepared to teach students from racial backgrounds and cultures different from their own (Lambeth & Smith, 2016; Howard & Milner, 2014). Many teacher education programs do not address urban education or culturally responsive pedagogy (Howard & Milner, 2014). The lack of preparation leads to ineffective teachers in urban areas. African-American students fail to engage (Milner, 2012; Newton & Sandoval, 2015). Thomas-Alexander and Harper (2017) found that many mentor teachers have a negative view of urban schools. The teachers with negative views characterize urban students as difficult, disadvantaged, and from single-parent homes. However, mentor teachers with high self-efficacy with culturally responsive teaching has positive comments about urban schools. Since mentor teachers have a significant effect on the views of preservice teachers, mentor teachers have the power to perpetuate either positive or negative views of urban communities (Lambeth & Smith, 2016; Thomas-Alexander & Harper, 2017).

Some universities have recognized the need to prepare teachers to be culturally responsive. Cleveland State University offers a Master of Urban Education. The program focuses on culturally relevant teaching practices to prepare teachers for urban environments (Thomas-Alexander & Harper, 2017). The teacher attrition rates at urban schools are high and teachers either feel unprepared or inadequate (Siwatu, 2011). Teachers often feel more

comfortable and more prepared to teach in suburban schools (Lambeth & Smith, 2016; Siwatu, 2011). However, when preservice teachers receive training on culturally responsive pedagogy, the teachers understand the importance of understanding the students' culture and creating a supportive environment (Lambeth & Smith, 2016). Teachers with culturally responsive training understood the importance of believing in students' academic ability (Gay, 2018; Lambeth & Smith, 2016). However, even with training teachers often struggle with relating to students and teacher may be unsure how to apply the concepts of building relationships in the classrooms with student of varying backgrounds (Lambeth & Smith, 2016). Teachers without proper training to teach in an urban environment enter to context with preconceived negative stereotypes about minority students which is reflected back to the students (Siwatu, 2011). Often after training, preservice teachers recognized the need for understanding students, their interest, and cultural background (Lambeth & Smith, 2016).

Teachers have a substantial effect on students' motivation and engagement (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Particularly in low-income areas, many teachers have lower perceptions of future educational goals for African-American students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Mahatmya et al., 2016). However, teachers with higher cultural awareness have a higher perception of future educational goals for African-American students (Mahatmya et al., 2016). Highly effective teachers in urban areas focus on developing the skills needed to teach effectively and understand the culture of the students (Waddell, 2013). Teachers are not adequately prepared to teach students from a culture different from their own. Many teachers have one class on diversity in the teacher education program (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Howard & Milner, 2014; Lambeth & Smith, 2016). Teachers often have student-teaching experiences in suburban Caucasian areas which does not prepare them for urban or African-

American student populations (Howard & Milner, 2014; Lambeth & Smith, 2016). If a school requires time in a diverse environment, the teacher may not realize the significance of the experience (Howard & Milner, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2000). The preservice teacher may expect to work in a suburban area after graduation (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lambeth & Smith, 2016). Also, the experience without context and reflection may lead to increase cultural prejudices (Ladson-Billings, 2000). The preservice teachers need support and guidance during diverse field experiences. Teacher education programs do not address culturally responsive pedagogy. Preservice teachers do not have opportunities to self-reflect on the belief, prejudices, and misconceptions brought into the classroom as a teacher (Howard & Milner, 2014; Thomas-Alexander & Hamilton, 2017).

### **Teachers in Suburban Schools**

The graduation gap exists in suburban schools despite the increase in financial resources (Chapman, 2014; Nunn, 2011; Rendon, 2014; Voight et al., 2017). Despite integration, African-American students struggle to achieve the same level as Caucasian students which points to the need for proper education in both suburban and urban schools (Chapman, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Rendon, 2014). “The bulk of the literature focused on racially inclusive school practices target teachers as the primary problem” (Chapman, 2014, p. p. 323). The achievement gap is higher in schools with low poverty (Gordon & Cui, 2018). Suburban schools place African-American students in lower track course, which perpetuates student feelings of incompetence (Burriss & Welner; Diamond, 2006, Kotok, 2010). African-American students report feeling that the teachers do not believe in their intellect (Chapman, 2014). Teachers have lower expectations of the academic ability and educational future for African-American students (Cham et al., 2014; Chapman, 2014). The African-American student report noticing the

difference in expectation in the academic ability for Caucasian and African-American students (Chapman, 2014). The lowered expectations and belief in the competence of the African-American students hinder the fostering of competence for African-American students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). African-Americans fail to achieve because the teachers' expectations affect the African-American expectations for their educational achievement (Chapman, 2014; Newton & Sandoval, 2015).

In suburban schools, African-American students struggle with having a sense of belonging. African-American students feel less connected to the school and teachers (Chapman, 2014; Gordon & Cui, 2018; Newton & Sandoval, 2015; Voight et al., 2015). Voight et al. (2015) found a strong correlation between school connectedness and achievement for African-American students in suburban schools. The study by Voight et al. stated the gap in school connectedness grew as the socioeconomic status of the school increased. The teacher-student relationship affects connectedness and students feel misunderstood by teachers. The lack of relationship leaves students without a way to integrate their outside lives inside of school (Chapman, 2014). Students feel more disconnected in advanced courses as there are fewer minorities in the classes (Kotok, 2010; Nunn, 2011) The lack of opportunity to engage with other African-Americans affects students' achievement and peer relatedness (Gordon & Cui, 2018; Kotok, 2010). The students feel more alienated because of teasing by other African-American students and the lack of relationship with the teacher (Chapman, 2014; Kotok, 2010).

Teachers in suburban schools are less likely to understand and respect the culture of the students (Chapman, 2014; Voight et al., 2015). However, teachers' cultural understanding is an important factor in students' sense of belonging (Chapman, 2014; Newton & Sandoval, 2015; Voight et al., 2015). The lack of cultural understanding leads African-American students to feel

frustrated as teachers misunderstand the students' attempt to connect and learn (Chapman, 2014; Newton & Sandoval, 2015; Nunn, 2011). Chapman (2014) found that African-American students in suburban schools do not believe that teachers can relate to their lives. Culturally responsive teachers effectively assist students in feeling connected through the relationship built from the cultural understanding (Newton & Sandoval, 2015; Voight et al., 2015). African-American students in schools with culturally responsive teachers are more connected and the achievement gap is narrowed (Voight et al., 2015).

### **Peer and Parental Involvement**

In addition to teachers, students are influenced by peers and parents (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Vollett, Kinderman, & Skinner, 2017). However, research supports the idea that teacher support can mediate lack of support or negative support from peers and parents. Quinn (2017) found that even when considering peer and parental support, teacher emotional and academic support can increase engagement. Vollett et al. (2017) found that peer influence on engagement is less likely if the student has a relationship with the teacher. Students have the lowest level of motivation and engagement when the students' peers are disengaged, and the teacher is unconcerned about the students' lives. Lack of parent support does affect a students' motivation and engagement level (Pan et al., 2017). However, teacher support impacts engagement more than parental involvement (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Quinn, 2017).

### **Summary**

The achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students provides one lens to view the gap in educational opportunities (Milner, 2012). Regardless of socioeconomic status or location of the school African-Americans drop out of school at a higher rate (Rendon, 2014; Storer, 2012). The lack of motivation and disengagement begins in elementary school and

persists throughout the student's school career (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Storer, 2012).

African-American students have been found to perceive low expectations from teachers and lack of connection in the classroom (Milner, 2012). Many African-American students do not have their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness met in the classroom and the result is a lack of intrinsic motivation (Shernoff, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013).

Intrinsic motivation is a critical component of persisting in high school and increasing learning (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). Rigorous tasks, high expectations, and scaffolded lessons in the classroom increase a student's competence (Shernoff et al., 2016). Competence causes a student to believe in their ability to complete tasks and persist in challenging situations (Taylor et al., 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Meeting students' needs for autonomy supports intrinsic motivation (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). Teachers can give students a sense of control through choices and opportunities for independent thinking (Wallace & Sung, 2017). Finally, students desire a sense of belonging and community in the classroom. Teachers should model and teach students how to have positive peer interactions (Field & Hoffman, 2012; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013).

Culturally responsive teaching may be an important factor for increasing engagement and motivation for African-American students. When a student's culture is affirmed and acknowledged in the classroom the student feels a sense of belonging (Gay, 2018; Voight et al., 2015). Culturally responsive pedagogy demands teachers hold all students to the same high expectations (Gay, 2018). Research has shown that often teachers have lower expectations of African-American students which causes students to disengage in the classroom (Mahatmya et al., 2016). When students feel their culture is integrated in the classroom, the students do not

have cultural conflict (Milner, 2012). The lack of cultural conflict gives students opportunities to connect to the curriculum, teacher, and peers (Gay, 2018; Milner, 2012).

There is a gap in literature detailing the lived experiences of teachers creating supportive classroom environments to encourage graduation for African-American students. Motivation and engagement are critical factors in hindering high school students from dropping out (Fan & Wolters, 2014). Teachers play a powerful role in the classroom which either promotes or hinders motivation and engagement. A supportive environment promotes the factors that increase self-determined motivation (Zaff et al., 2017). Research is clear that motivation and engagement promote persistence in high school; however, the strategies necessary to motivate and engage African-American students is unclear. Some studies posit that strategies to increase motivation are the same for all students while other researchers insist that culturally responsive pedagogy is necessary for the motivation of African-American students (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Gay, 2018). However, research does not discuss the daily lived experiences of the teachers in the classroom with creating a supportive environment. The current study to investigate the experiences of high school teachers sheds light on how motivation and engagement strategies integrate into the classroom and the teachers' decisions on the best way to build the classroom environment.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

Phenomenology seeks to take the experiences of several individuals with the same phenomenon and capture the core meaning of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transcendental phenomenology provides a rich, thick description of the data without the bias or judgment of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, *epoché*, the bracketing out of the researcher's feeling is paramount to transcendental phenomenology. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers who have created supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate. The participants in the current study were teachers who teach at schools with above average graduation rates for African-American students. The participants participated in interviews, journals, and a focus group. This study gives voice to the lived experiences of teachers creating the supportive classroom environment for African-American students. This chapter will explain the research design and rationale. The chapter will provide details on the setting, participants, and procedure for the study. Additionally, the data collection and data analysis will be outlined.

### Design

Qualitative research helps researchers understand the perspectives and lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). The nature of qualitative research allows for deeper meanings and connections (Patton, 2015). A quantitative study on building a supportive classroom environment could provide a list of strategies, but it would not capture the feelings and experiences of the teachers in the classroom. The emotion of the experiences of the teacher with the strategies will help the reader to walk in the shoes of the teacher (Patton, 2015).

A quantitative survey can capture the strategies to create a supportive environment, but a qualitative study will also capture the experiences, feelings, and emotions of the teacher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative study uses open-ended questions to obtain in-depth perceptions and deeper meanings from the participants (Patton, 2015). Qualitative data gives the reader a chance to connect with the teacher as the teacher shares the journey of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The connection with the participants will hopefully spur change to prepare all teachers for all school contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lambeth & Smith, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological study will capture not only what the teachers experienced but how they interpreted the journey (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The common essence gives meaning to the success and challenges as teachers build classroom environment (Patton, 2015). The phenomenological approach captures not only the experience but how the person experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the case of the current study, how the teachers experienced the creation of a supportive classroom environment is just as critical as the strategies. Administrators will be able to appreciate the journey teachers engage in to focus on the classroom environment. Policymakers may understand the journey and decide to require more training to prepare the teachers to better serve African-American students. The phenomenological study takes the reader deep into the lived experiences of others so that the reader can understand the essence of a person experiencing the given phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

Specifically, this study used a transcendental phenomenology design. The purpose of the transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers who created supportive classroom environments that encourage African-

American students to graduate in Southeastern Michigan. The researcher wanted to gain a new perspective on the experiences of the teachers' without entering the personal experiences of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recognizing that the researcher brings assumptions and bias to the study, the researcher must intentionally focus on the experiences that need to be told from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). *Epoché* requires the researcher to refrain from experiencing the phenomenon through personal lenses before experiencing it through the lens of the participants. *Epoché* necessitates that the researcher reflects on personal experiences with the phenomenon and preconceptions of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). During reflection, the researcher releases assumptions to ensure the participant's voice is clear. By using intuition, the researcher can provide a rich description of what the participants experienced and allow the past experiences of the participant to shine through without interpretation (Moustakas, 1994).

Another critical component of transcendental phenomenology is intentionality. Intentionality requires the researcher to be aware of how consciousness, perceptions, and reality can converge to change the way a situation is viewed. Intentionality asks the researcher to set aside judgment and biases to view the experience the way the participants frame the experience. Noema, the what of the phenomenon being experienced, and noesis, the how of the phenomenon being experienced, integrate to frame intentionality. The process of intentionality may involve many meanings which together create the whole picture of the experience. For the participants, the process of expressing and describing an experience brings clarity which makes the unveiling of the noema and noesis possible. The descriptions of the experiences then become both textural and structural (Moustakas, 1994).

Husserl (1913) is credited with founding transcendental phenomenology. According to Husserl, phenomenology represented a science of the essence of the experience. Husserl believed each person has a set of norms and beliefs that are real in their world. Therefore, the researcher must view the experiences of the participant through the lens of the participant's world and from multiple perspectives. Under the influence of Descartes, Husserl presented the concept of *epoché*. *Epoché*, a premise of transcendental phenomenology, required the researcher to understand the essence of a phenomenon while bracketing out one's assumptions through self-reflection. The key to transcendental phenomenology is the ability of the researcher not to form an understanding of the phenomenon, but instead, allow the participants to guide the researcher to the meaning. According to Husserl, an intuitive reflective process, allows the researcher to intuitively reflect to allow perceptions to reflect the actual meaning clearly (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guide this transcendental phenomenological study:

#### **Central Research Question**

What have been the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers with creating supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate in Southeastern Michigan?

#### **Guiding Question One**

How do high school teachers describe experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment by building students' self-confidence in learning?

#### **Guiding Question Two**

How do high school teachers describe experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment by building students' independence and offering choice?

**Guiding Question Three**

How do high school teachers describe experiences with building a sense of belonging to create a supportive classroom environment?

**Guiding Question Four**

How do high school teachers describe experiences with using engagement to create a supportive classroom environment?

**Setting**

The setting of the study was Southeastern Michigan. For the purpose of this study, Southeastern Michigan was defined by the five largest counties in the southeast portion of Michigan. The five counties are Genesee, Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw, and Wayne county. The counties are made up of 124 districts which service approximately 697,800 students. The schools in these counties have 28 % of the students reporting as African-American with the largest African-American population in Genesee, Oakland, and Wayne counties. However, the demographics of Southeastern Michigan continues to shift as African-American families move into suburbs and Caucasian families move into urban areas (MSD, 2018).

Due to the varying levels of diversity in the area, a study in southeastern Michigan may provide conclusions which can be generalizable in several contexts (MSD, 2018). Studies have shown that engagement and motivation are key factors in educational attainment and prevention of dropping out of high school (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Wang & Fredricks, 2014; Zaff et al., 2017). Researchers assert that classroom environment plays a role in the engagement and motivation of African-American students (Wang & Fredricks, 2014; Zaff et al., 2017). Therefore, high school teachers in Southeastern Michigan who create supportive classroom environments have experiences to share on the impact of the classroom environment on African-

American students' perseverance toward graduation. Permission was received from the local teachers' union to solicit participation from members of the union. The IRB approval letter has been placed in Appendix A instead of the letter from the teachers' union to preserve the confidentiality of the teachers' union.

### **Participants**

The study used purposeful sampling to sample teachers. Purposeful sampling is the process of selecting participants based on their ability to describe their experience with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants have at least three years of experience teaching at a school with a high graduation rates for African-Americans with a population of at least 25 % of the students identifying as African American. Participants were recruited through teachers' unions. The recruitment letter was sent to high school teachers (See Appendix B). Eight participants responded to the flyer posted through the teacher's union. The research used snowball sampling to find teachers across southeastern Michigan through other participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Five participants were found through snowball sampling. Two participants withdrew from the study for personal reasons.

The teachers were selected based on the results of a survey to confirm that the teacher meets the criteria of working at a school with high graduation rates for African-American students with 25% or more of the students identifying as African-American (see Appendix C). A survey determined if the potential participants met the criteria for number of years of teaching (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Teachers who did not meet the criteria were notified via email (see Appendix D). Maximum variation requires the researcher to use a diverse set of participants to ensure the data better represents the larger population. The sample has maximum variation by having participants who are in suburban and urban schools as well as ethnically diverse males

and females (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The survey ensured the study used a diverse set of teachers. The participants included six Caucasian teachers and five African-American teachers. The study included three male teachers and eight female teachers. I sought 12-15 participants and sampled until thematic saturation has occurred (Polkinghorne, 1989). Thematic saturation occurs when themes begin to repeat in the data with additional participants (Patton, 2015). After beginning with 13 participants, 11 participants completed the study.

### **Procedures**

First, two experts with doctorates in education and experience conducting qualitative research reviewed the data collection tools. The research questions, interview and focus group questions, and journal prompts were reviewed by two experts. The experts examined the questions to ensure the face and content validity of the data collection methods. Based on the feedback from one of the experts, I changed the wording of the first question to make it less formal to ease the participant into the interview. Both experts agreed that some of my questions should be deleted to focus the interview question on the central research questions and reduce redundancy. As a result, the interview questions were reduced from fifteen to eleven. The journal and focus group questions were not changed.

Following IRB approval, a pilot study, consisting of three high school teachers, tested the clarity of the interview, journal questions, and focus group questions. The participants in the pilot study participated in the interview, journal writing, and focus group prior to the study beginning. The process ensured the questions provided the necessary data and also provided an opportunity to practice the interview process. However, none of the data collected from the pilot study was included when analyzing the data from the actual study.

After receiving IRB approval, data collection began. After teachers meeting the criteria

were identified through the demographics survey, the teachers were invited to participate and were given an informed consent (see Appendix E). The informed consent outlined the risks, benefits, the details of the study. The informed consent is an agreement which also ensures the participants' identity will be confidential and participants' rights to withdraw at any time (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

Chosen participants then participated in interviews to discuss the participants' experiences in building classroom environment. Three writing prompts were given to the teachers to reflect on how the classroom environment impacted students over the course of a week. Lastly, the participants participated in a focus group to discuss experiences with being flexible in the classroom environment to support diversity of needs among students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were allowed to view transcripts and request changes as part of the member checking (Moustakas, 1994). All data was transcribed by me and stored on a password-protected computer and written data was locked in a cabinet in my home office (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **The Researcher's Role**

I am the human instrument for data collection and analysis in this study. I did not have an authoritative role with my participants. As a teacher, I believe that all students should have a quality education. I believe that teachers should seek out and use the best instructional strategies to meet the needs of the students in the classroom. Many African-American students are faced with an educational system that does not prepare them to be successful in adulthood. The cycle of poverty and inequity in education continues each generation (Ladson-Billings, 2000). I believe teachers must intentionally create a classroom environment that works for each student and consider the race and background of the student.

As an African-American woman born to parents who worked hard to move our family to the suburbs where I could have a quality education, I feel passionate about the families left in failing educational systems. Even though I was only 11 when I moved to the suburbs, I immediately saw the difference in the quality of education and way of life. As a student in a suburban classroom, I felt the effect of the lack of a supportive classroom. In middle school, I withdrew and did not engage in the classroom as I continually felt ignored by teachers and peers. Thankfully, I encountered teachers in high school who focused on the classroom environment and guided me to excel and take honors level classes. My experiences in middle school and high school motivated me to give voice to the teachers who focus on supporting students' needs through a supportive classroom environment. I plan to bracket myself out of the study because my perspective may cloud the interpretation of the results. Also, as an African-American, I recognize that in many cases integrating culturally responsive practices into my classroom may be simpler because I understand the culture of many African-American families. I recognize that I bring all of my opinions, and background into the study and I have to let go of my bias to conduct the research.

### **Data Collection**

I ensured the triangulation of data by using three methods to engage with the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, the participants had an in-depth interview. The interview allowed the participant to share past and current experiences in the classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Second, the participants responded to three journal prompts to reflect on attempts to build a supportive environment for all students. The journal captured the daily interactions and moments in the classroom which will give me descriptive data on the experience in the classroom. The participants' journal helped me find the essence of the

experiences of the teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, the teachers participated in a focus group to discuss how the classroom environment is adapted based on the need of the students in the classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to scheduling conflicts, two separate focus groups took place.

## **Interviews**

The interviews provided in-depth personal perspectives on the experiences of the teachers with building a supportive classroom environment (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). The interviews allowed for observations of the participant and the emotions the participant engages in as the interview progresses (Patton, 2015). Prior to the interview, the participants were reminded that the purpose of the study was to determine the experiences with building a supportive classroom environment for African-American students. The reminder was done to focus the participants thoughts on the African-American students in their classroom. The interview began with questions which helped the participant to relax and feel comfortable sharing details from the experiences in the classroom (Moustakas, 1994). The questions were structured to allow the participant to interview to evolve naturally (Patton, 2015). The broad questions allowed the participant to direct the conversation and provide rich data on the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The interview questions have been included below.

### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions (Appendix F)

1. Tell me about yourself and educational background
2. Describe your professional timeline including schools and demographics of schools where you have worked.
3. Describe how your professional timeline assisted in the development of your supportive classroom environment.

4. Describe your experience with students feeling capable in the classroom.
5. Describe your experience with helping students persevere in the classroom.
6. Describe your experience with giving students choices in the classroom.
7. Describe your experience with students taking ownership in the classroom.
8. Describe your experience with helping students feel connected to you.
9. Describe your experience with helping students feel connected to their peers.
10. Describe your experience with engaging all students in learning in the classroom.
11. Describe your experience with engaging students to enjoy your content area.

The first three questions allowed for time to get to know the participant and the past experiences that have developed the teacher into the person the teacher is at the time of the interview. The questions also gave the participant a time to become comfortable and ready to dig into deep reflective questions (Moustakas, 1994). The data gained will provide the point of view of the teacher to frame the answers to the rest of the questions (Patton, 2015).

Questions four through nine deals with the teachers' experiences with the components of self-determination. The components of competence, autonomy, and relatedness lead to a person having self-determined motivation which is linked to academic success. Deci and Ryan (2008) discussed the need for all three psychological needs to be met to help the person reach self-determined motivation. On the other hand, controlled motivation which some teachers use in the form of reward and punishment norms, hinders learning (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). Self-determined motivation increases a students' persistence to finish high school (Fan & Wolters, 2014).

Questions ten through eleven seek to determine the teachers' experiences with behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Wang and Fredericks (2014) found that all three

dimensions of engagement encourage persistence in high school; however, behavioral engagement has the biggest impact on the persistence of students. The question seeks to determine the teachers' experiences with each dimension of engagement. The experiences will provide data on how the teachers' point of view concerning the dimensions of engagement.

### **Journal**

A journal prompt (Appendix G) gave the participants an opportunity to consider how the classroom environment impacted students' motivation and engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the interview, the participant considered how the daily interactions with students occurred. The prompts asked the participants to reflect on the interaction with the students during the previous week and how the teacher worked to build a supportive classroom environment. Participants self-observed their behavior and reflected on the impact of their daily practices. Reflection is a key component of creating a supportive classroom and will add to the description of the experience (Lambeth & Smith, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Participant journals provided time for the participant to reflect alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants answered one question a week for three weeks. Each week the question focused on one aspect of building intrinsic motivation in students. The journal prompts are listed below.

#### Journal Prompts: (Appendix G)

1. Thinking about the past week, describe a time when you intentionally focused on helping an African-American student feel competent to be successful in your classroom. Describe your perceptions on how your efforts helped the student.
2. Thinking about the past week, describe a time when you intentionally focused on helping an African-American student have a sense of independence and choice in the classroom. Describe your perceptions on how your efforts helped the student.

3. Thinking about the past week, describe a time when you intentionally focused on helping an African-American student feel a sense of belonging or community in the classroom. Describe your perceptions on how your efforts helped the student.

The journal prompts allowed the participant to reflect on their experiences with building a supportive classroom environment. Culturally responsive teachers can reflect on their teaching practices and learn from successes and failures (Gay, 2018). The journal prompts gave the participant an opportunity to connect their efforts to create a supportive classroom with the outcome.

### **Focus Group**

The participants participated in one focus group. According to Patton (2015), focus groups solidify the descriptions and themes which emerge from individual interviews. The focus group focused on the differentiation that may occur as the teacher creates the supportive classroom environment. The focus group centered around adapting the classroom environment based on the students in the room. The questions sought to determine the teachers' experiences with being flexible to create an environment suitable for all students. The focus group allowed data to emerge from the interaction of the participants. The participants were divided into two focus groups to allow participants to choose a time that works best for their schedule. The smaller groups ensured all voices were heard in the focus groups (Patton, 2015).

Standardized Focus Group Questions: (Appendix H)

1. How do you adapt motivation strategies based on the classroom dynamics?
2. How do you adapt engagement strategies based on the classroom dynamics?
3. How do you adapt your classroom environment practices when you faced with a student who refuses to engage?

4. What are your experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment for unmotivated students?
5. How do you incorporate the culture of the students in the classroom into creating a supportive classroom environment?

Questions one and two seek to determine how the motivation and engagement strategies are altered by the students in the classroom. Gay (2010) described one component of culturally responsive teaching as the ability to meet the needs of the student. Motivation and engagement require the teacher to meet the students' need for competence, autonomy, and belonging (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). Each student may have a unique set of needs which may require differentiation from the teacher (Gay, 2018; Shernoff et al., 2016; Warren-Grice, 2017).

Questions three and four examine the teachers' ability to develop strategies to motivate and engage students who are not engaged and motivated. The lack of motivation and engagement hinder academic progress and graduation status (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Wang & Fredericks, 2014; Shernoff et al., 2016). However, teachers play a key role in reengaging and motivating students (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016).

Question five seeks to determine whether culture plays a role in the creation of the supportive classroom environment. Some research indicates that the teacher must incorporate the culture of the student to engage and motivate students (Gay, 2018; Warren-Grice, 2017; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). While other research posits that all students have the same basic needs which influence motivation and engagement (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016).

## Data Analysis

The data analysis began when I transcribed the interviews and focus groups data. The participants had the opportunity to read the transcriptions to ensure the words are accurate. I hand coded the transcriptions as well as the journal entries (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data analysis process begins *epoché* to ensure bias is removed from the data analysis process. I used transcendental-phenomenological reduction to develop the textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). I used the process of horizontalization to list the relevant statements from each participant. Each chosen statement added to the meaning and description of the phenomenon. I reduced the statements down to the core statements or invariant horizons which expressed the experience with the phenomenon.

The invariant horizons detailed a part of the experience which is necessary for understanding the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I ensured the invariant horizons were able to be labeled and not be repetitive. Next, I clustered the invariant horizons into core themes describing the experience (See Appendix I). The clusters or themes label each cluster of invariant horizons. I considered the invariant horizons and the themes in relation to all the data. The themes and invariant horizons were either explicitly expressed in the transcripts or were compatible with the transcripts. Then, I used the verified invariant horizons and themes to construct individual textural descriptions. I compiled the individual textural descriptions to find a textural description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The process includes reflection and researcher journaling to maintain *epoché* (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The process of imaginative variation developed the structural description or the how of the experience. First, I viewed the experience from several perspectives and possible meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Next, I engaged in a repeated process of finding the structural meaning in

the textural description for each participant by viewing the textural descriptions through multiple lenses. From this process, I analyzed the possible structural meanings, and developed a structural description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The structural and textural descriptions combined to provide a rich, thick, textural-structural description of the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a key component of qualitative research. The study must establish credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility ensures the data is reported accurately to express the lived experiences of the participants. Dependability ensures that the study is properly tracked, and reliable methods are used for data collection. Confirmability establishes the need for the data to be able to be confirmed by others. Transferability ensures the study could be repeated under the same conditions and maintain the conclusions (Lincoln, 2004).

### **Credibility**

Credibility was achieved by triangulation of the data and prolonged time with the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For triangulation, the three data collection methods worked together to confirm the lived experiences of the participants (Lincoln, 2004). Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated that to achieve triangulation multiple methods should be used to corroborate the findings. Also, spending extensive time with participants builds relationship and trust. The relationship allowed me to understand the participants and their experiences with the phenomenon better. The study engaged with participants in an in-depth interview, focus group and participant journaling. The multiple contacts with the participants through interviews, focus groups, and journals provided a clear picture of the lived experiences and prevent

misinterpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln, 2004). The participants were able participate in member checking by confirming the transcripts from the interview and their part in the focus group. The dissertation committee was regularly be debriefed to ensure credibility is maintained (Patton, 2015).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability requires that I focus on ensuring the data collection process can be tracked and documented. The tracking and documentation are used to demonstrate that the data is reliable (Patton, 2015). I kept accurate records of data collection and a researcher's journal (See Appendix J). Also, there was a peer review to review the findings and interpretations (Patton, 2015).

Confirmability demonstrated that the findings can be confirmed. The data was confirmed by the participants with member checks of the transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A rich description of the participants, setting, the essence of the experience, and findings will aid in confirming the results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The *epoché* process will assist with confirmability as the data analysis will be free from my biases (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher's journal (Appendix J) captured feelings and assumptions to prevent judgments during the data collection and data analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Transferability**

Transferability will allow the study to be repeated with similar results (Lincoln, 2004). Participants were from six different schools. The schools varied in locations around Southeast Michigan to attempt to increase transferability. The locations included suburban, urban, public and private schools. Maximum variation ensured differences in the demographics of the participants. Also, the study included rich descriptive data of the data, findings, and

interpretation (Patton, 2015). An audit trail will be created to keep track of the date procedures were completed (see Appendix K).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The data was not collected until IRB has approved the study. The participants signed an informed consent which included study details, risk, and benefits of participants. All data is confidential, and the data will be secured in a locked cabinet for three years before data is shredded. All electronic data is stored on a password protected computer and erased after three years (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I minimized risk by giving the participants and the schools where the participants teach pseudonyms. The participants were free to withdraw at any time and the data of participants who withdraw will be shredded. The focus group data of a withdrawn participant was not used in the study but was not be shredded as the data will contain information from other participants. The participants were able to review the transcripts to ensure accuracy (Moustakas, 1994). Journals and other written data are locked in a cabinet in my home office (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Summary**

The purpose of the transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers creating supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate in Southeastern Michigan. The qualitative approach provides a detailed description of the lived experiences through open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). The transcendental phenomenological data provided the teachers perceptions and lived experiences with creating a supportive classroom and the strategies used in the process. The experiences and thought process provided a rich description of the experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Administrators, policy makers,

and teachers can use the lived experience to inform future educational decisions. The bracketing out of the research focused on the participants perceptions without interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The setting for the study was Southeastern Michigan. The diversity of the demographics of Southeastern Michigan allow the study to be useful in several contexts (MSD, 2018). The teachers in the study had at least three years of experience. Purposeful sampling and maximum variation provided diversity among the demographics of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants participated in interviews, journal writing, and focus groups. The structured open-ended interviews were designed to have the participants share perceptions and lived experiences in creating a supportive classroom (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). The participant journals had the participants reflect on daily interactions with students in the classroom and how the interaction affects the process of creating a supportive classroom. Lastly, the focus groups focused on how the participants adjusted supportive classroom strategies in the classroom based on the students in the room. The focus groups confirmed the descriptions and themes from the interviews and journal prompts (Patton, 2015).

The data analysis process used *epoché*, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation to compose a textural and structural description of the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The transcripts of the journals, interviews, and focus groups were reduced to relevant statements and then themes. The themes constructed the rich thick description of the lived experiences (Moustakas, 2018). Throughout the process trustworthiness was maintained as through the use credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The lived experiences of teachers' who build supportive classrooms for African-American students are described in this chapter. Eleven participants shared how they interacted with African-American students to provide the support necessary to help students persevere toward high school graduation. The eleven participants come from diverse backgrounds while sharing a similar experience. Three themes emerged from the data which described how the participants use relationships, collaboration, and positive reinforcement to help African-American students remain motivated and engaged. The three themes answer the research questions and describe the lived experiences of the teachers. The teacher-student relationships provide students with not only a sense of belonging but also encourages engagement. Collaboration allows the teacher to build competence and autonomy in the classroom which aids in engaging students. Lastly, positive reinforcement by the teacher makes the student feel competent and helps teachers maintain engagement through challenging content. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers who have created supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate. This chapter provides a narrative of the participants experiences in the classroom.

### **Participants**

The participants were eleven high school teachers from schools with high graduation rates for African-Americans. The participants included eight females and three males, and six Caucasians and five African-Americans. The years of experience ranged from three to twenty-five. The participants taught at a diverse set of suburban, urban, public and private schools. A

pseudonym was used for each participant. Eight of the participants, Rose, Lynn, Kim, Amanda, Kate, Carter, Sara, and Andrea, participated in the interview, journal prompt, and the focus group. However, Thomas only completed the interview and journal prompts because his schedule did not allow him to participate in a focus group. Due to personal reasons, Maria and John, did not have time to complete the journals or participate in either focus group.

Demographics on the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Biographical Information*

Pseudonym	Race	Years of Experience	Subject(s) Taught	Type of School
Rose	African-American	22	Math and Science	Urban Public
Lynn	Caucasian	9	Math	Suburban Public
Kim	Caucasian	23	Math	Suburban Public
Amanda	Caucasian	3	Science	Suburban Public
Maria	African-American	17	Math	Urban Public
Thomas	Caucasian	14	Math	Suburban Public
Kate	African-American	25	English	Suburban Public
Carter	African-American	23	Science	Suburban Public
Sara	Caucasian	5	Science	Urban Public
Andrea	African-American	18	Math	Urban Public
John	Caucasian	16	Social Studies	Suburban Public

**Rose**

Rose has been a high school math teacher for 22 years. She has taught in multiple high schools both suburban and urban which primarily serve African-American students. Currently, Rose works in an urban high school with 97% of students reporting as African-American. Rose's mother encouraged Rose to become a teacher from a young age; however, Rose was insistent that she would do anything else. Rose studied Biology and Chemistry in college and was on her way to study clinical research in graduate school when her mom mentioned a program to earn a Master's and teaching certificate. Rose felt she should give the program a try and became a substitute teacher while she went to graduate school. Through substitute teaching Rose found her love for high school students and mathematics. She fell in love with the fact that "every single minute is different." Rose approaches teaching with a passion for changing the way students view math. She said, "You may come in apprehensive, scared, or nervous, but when you leave, you're like a little rosebush that has just blossomed." Rose's passion for building relationships with students is her secret weapon for teaching math. She shows students that she genuinely cares for them and then "all the math is just going to naturally come."

**Lynn**

Lynn always desired to be a teacher. She went to college with a desire to be a physical education teacher but minored in math to ensure she would find a job. Lynn loves both subjects and obtained her first job teaching math at a suburban high school in metro Detroit. After two years, Lynn was able to split her time as a physical education and math at the high school. Lynn has been teaching for 9 years at the school and has spent most of her career teaching the schools lower level math courses in the schools tracked system. Although the school only has a 27% population of African-American students, the lower level math classes generally have up to 70%

of the students reporting as African-American. Lynn loves to teach the lower level math classes and watch the kids “grow in their mathematical skills.” Lynn focuses on her students’ needs. She described her job “working with the bottom 30% students they have different needs than working with the kids that are more academically successful and my job is the listen to what they need and adapt my classroom to meet their needs.” Lynn feels that the “students are in her class because of confidence and not ability.”

### **Kim**

Kim and Lynn work in the same suburban school with 27 % of the students reporting as African-American. Kim grew up in a home with two educators. Her mother was an elementary school teacher and her father was a principal of a middle school. She loved going to work with both of her parents and always desired to be an educator. In high school, Kim developed a love for mathematics. “My Calculus teacher made learning a difficult level of math fun and interesting and I knew I wanted to do the same work.” Kim grew up in a rural area of Michigan but after college moved to metro Detroit with her husband. She has taught at the same suburban high school for 23 years. Unlike her coworker Lynn, Kim teaches all levels of mathematics including honors, regular, and remedial. Kim attributes her teaching style to a teacher coach she had during her first three years of teaching. The coach would observe her in the classroom and offer support. “My teacher coach would help me learn to read my classroom and assess what’s needed so I could make changes based on the needs of my students.” Kim is confident that every student can learn math. “A kid just needs to confidence to learn math sometimes that means connecting math to their world, sometimes that means positive affirmations, I just have to figure out how to help them find their thing.”

**Amanda**

Amanda loved school from the very beginning. She loved to pretend to be a teacher and had several educators in her extended family. Every grade Amanda entered she declared she would be that grade teacher when she grew up. When Amanda reached 10<sup>th</sup> grade, she took chemistry and fell in love with the subject. Amanda said, “I knew I wanted to teach chemistry for the rest of my life. I just remember sitting there watching my teacher make the fire change colors and literally I was like I want to be you.” Amanda grew up in a primarily Caucasian rural area. She student taught close to home in a school in the middle of the rural and urban line of the city. The school was diverse with Caucasian, African-American, Asian, and a population second generation immigrant from Bosnia and South Africa. After graduation, Amanda moved to metro Detroit for a job at a suburban private school with a 72% African-American population. Amanda views her student teaching experiences as critical in her developing skills to teach in a diverse setting. Her mentor teacher emphasized “get to know your students because when you start to teach that’s going to be critical in your ability to control the classroom.”

**Maria**

Maria teaches math in an urban high school with 99 % of the students reporting as African-American. Maria has taught in several high schools over the last 17 years with most of the schools being urban high schools. Maria went to college to be an engineer but graduated during a time when engineering jobs were difficult to find in the metro Detroit area. She began substitute teaching while applying for engineering jobs. She fell in love with teaching and the school asked her to take a long-term substitute position teaching math. During the summer break, Maria applied for graduate programs in education and continued to teach math while working on her Master’s. Maria feels connected to her students as she grew up in the area where

she teaches. Maria stated, “Being a part of the community makes it easier for me to relate to the students and identify with my students” For Maria, the key component to motivating students is to “genuinely love each student and treat them with respect.” Maria says, “everybody wants respect, and everybody wants to be loved.”

### **Thomas**

Thomas grew up with a love for math and science. As an only child, Thomas spent hours reading and exploring. He desired to be an engineer. While in college to become an engineer Thomas, began tutoring and mentoring high school students. He realized he loved math and teaching more than engineering so he changed his major to mathematics education. After college, Thomas had a job as a long-term substitute teacher in a suburban low-income Caucasian high school. After a year, Thomas began teaching at an ethnically and economically diverse suburban high school with 29 % of the students reporting as African-American. Thomas described his current teaching style as completely different from the way he started 14 years ago although he is unsure of how the transformation happened. Thomas said, “When I started, I felt like it was on the student to sit and learn from me. I was not interested in knowing why a student did not want to learn it was their problem.” However, over the years Thomas’ changed his mindset. Thomas said, “I have realized my part in helping students connect to me and the subject. I enjoy getting to know my students and knowing their stories.” Thomas has seen a shift in his result as a teacher with students engaging in the classroom and connecting with him personally.

### **Kate**

Kate has been teaching high school English for 22 years. She began her career in business and worked in for a large corporation in Metro Detroit for seven years. When Kate

desired to have children, she realized her career was too demanding to focus on family and work. She began working on her Master's in education and entered the classroom as a middle school teacher. After six years, she began teaching high school and currently teaches at a suburban high school with 96 % of the students reporting as African-American. Kate attributes her teaching style to a mentor teacher she had during her first five years of teaching. The mentor teacher would not only help Kate during school but invited Kate into her home and would go through lesson plans and best practices for teaching English. Kate said "When I had issues in the classroom with students, she would help me work through it. I think 85% of what I do in the classroom and the way I conduct myself is because of her influence." Kate finds that connecting students' lives to the content is the key to motivating and engaging all students.

### **Carter**

Carter works at the same suburban high school as Kate. Carter began his career as a scientist in a biology laboratory. Many people told him that he would be a great teacher, so he began working with students in his church as a tutor. The more Carter tutored the more he began to think teaching would be a good fit for his life. He enrolled in a graduation program in education and simultaneously began teaching science at a private urban high school. Carter has taught in the African-American community for 23 years. He currently teaches Physics in a suburban predominately African-American school. A mentor at the private school where Carter began his career taught him "the importance of knowing your audience and spending time watching the moods and mannerisms of the students." Carter believes that the moods and attitudes of the students can drive the classroom. Carter felt that the graduate program in education "doesn't prepare you for the classroom. It only tells you the mechanics but as far as the environment and dealing with students it doesn't prepare you." However, the advice from

the mentor teacher about getting to know the students and knowing how to meet their needs has molded Cater into the teacher he is now after 23 years.

### **Sara**

Sara earned a bachelor's in environmental science and biology. She worked in the environmental conservation area for two years after college. After returning to Michigan, she began tutoring and realized that she loved working with high school students. She applied to a Master's program in education and a fellowship program to pay for students interested in education as a second career. After receiving her teaching certificate, Sara began teaching science in a successful urban charter school and now a prestigious urban public school with 99 % of the students reporting as African-American. Sara knew that if she was going to teach that it would be in an urban area. Sara says "The Master's program prepared me to work in an urban school. The professors taught us how to structure a classroom and the importance of a strong beginning and sound structure." Professional development has honed Sara's skills of using inquiry-based modeling in the science classroom. For Sara, "coming up with different ways to teach the same kind of thing" helps engage all students based on their learning style.

### **Andrea**

Andrea has been an educator for 18 years. She loved school as a student and loved working with kids at church and as a tutor in college. Andrea initially wanted to pursue engineering because of pressure from her high school teachers but before graduation Andrea realized she desired to be an educator. Andrea initially began her career as an elementary school teacher and later became certified to teach mathematics for kindergarten to twelfth grade. Andrea has taught middle and high school math but finds her passion is with high school "because of the level of conversations she can have with high school students." Andrea finds

that “high school students needs more nurturing as they navigate adolescence.” Andrea has been teaching in an urban public school with 97 % of the students reporting as African-American for the last 15 years. She is passionate about “making mathematics accessible for all students.”

### **John**

John has been a social studies teacher for 16 years. John studied history and political science in college, but after gradation realized he wanted to teach social studies. He began his career with a limited license and spent four years teaching social studies to emotionally impaired students. Through the experience John learned to “connect with students and connect the content to the student.” After receiving his teaching certificate, John began teaching social studies at a private suburban high school. The school was mostly Caucasian when John began his career and has since shifted as the demographics of the area has changed. Currently, the school has 84 % of the students reporting as African-American. John is passionate about “making history relevant.” John believes that “social studies should be taught holistically and represent all cultures accurately.” As such John makes “every effort to ensure that African American students see American history, as part of their history not just American history told just from the white man's perspective.”

### **Results**

The current study sought to determine the lived experiences of teachers creating supportive classroom environments in schools where African-American students have a graduation rate higher than the national average. The interview and focus group questions did not explicitly mention African-American students; however, to ensure participants focused on their African-American students, the purpose of the study was reiterated to ensure participant understood the desire to seek information of how the participant motivated and engaged African-

American students. Eight of the participants, Rose, Amanda, Maria, Kate, Carter, Sara, and Andrea, teach in predominately African-American schools and as such their comments address motivating African-American students directly. Although Lynn teaches in a school with only 27% of students reporting as African-American, she teaches classes with 70 % students reporting as African-American. Both Thomas and Kim have experience teaching classes with predominately African-American students, but they both teach a variety of classes many of which are predominately Caucasian. The participants were asked to reflect on their interactions with African-American students in the journals. The interviews, participant journals, and focus groups were all focused on answering the central questions and four guiding questions. All three data collection methods were used to ensure triangulation. After the data was transcribed and hand-coded three themes emerged. The three themes each had subthemes to better describe the theme. The three themes and seven subthemes supported the research questions.

### **Theme Development**

After all, three data collection methods were completed, all the data was transcribed by hand. The relevant statements from the interviews, journal prompts, and the focus groups were listed and then reduced into invariant horizons. The invariant horizons were clustered into core themes. The core themes were divided into subthemes to provide better descriptions of the themes. The details of the themes and subthemes in relation to the invariant horizons is provided in Appendix I. The themes are supported with quotes from the participants. The quotes are written verbatim; therefore, the quotes include verbal ticks and grammatical errors to accurately represent the participants' voices.

**Theme 1:Teacher-Student Relationships.** The most prominent theme was to get to know each student. Each participant mentioned the importance of knowing each student to

improve motivation and engagement. Rose echoed the comments of all the participants by saying, “Relationship is key especially with African-American students. They need to know you, trust you, and be known.” The data showed the participants’ strong belief that teacher-student relationships encourage students to learn. Also, the relationships allow the teacher to understand aspects of students’ life which impact learning such as students point of view, interests, and life outside of school. The list of subthemes can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

*Sub-Themes of Teacher-Student Relationships*

Sub-Themes	Theme
Intentionally engage student in conversations	
Relationships encourage learning	Teacher-Student Relationships
Relationships engage the unengaged	

***Intentionally engage students in conversations.*** The first subtheme centered around using conversations to build a student-teacher relationship. Of the participants, 54% mentioned getting to know students beginning the first week of school. Rose said, “I always try to spend like maybe about the first week of school, just really getting to know them.” Several other teachers mentioned using icebreakers to get to understand student personalities and interests.

Andrea described:

Within the first days we do math-based activities that allow me to get to know personalities and math understanding. We may play a handshake game and at the end we write a function to model it. We may do a puzzle using deductive reasoning, but the kids are talking, and I am listening.

During the first focus group, the importance of connecting by knowing student names was discussed. Carter mentioned, “I learn their names as fast as possible and the correct

pronunciation. They get so impressed if you know their names, but they don't know I talked to other teachers and had their pictures memorized." Amanda agreed, "I write their names at least four different times so they're in my head. But it's funny in a small school they actually expect you already know who they are."

The process of getting to know students varied; however, seven participants stand at the door to greet students. The time before class allows for a quick connection. Thomas used this time daily to find out more about his students. Thomas said, "I greet them when they come in by hanging out in the hallway, you know. As they're coming in, I just say 'Hey, what's going on?'" The students begin to know the routine and expect the greeting. Maria expressed that her students will remind her and say, "Hey you didn't say good morning." The time at the door also allows teachers to look for potential moods that can affect learning. Carter expressed the need to use this time to "watch them, watch their mannerisms, how they come in, in the morning, the look on their face, and their attitude because that can drive your class mood." In her journal, Rose shared a story of how standing at the door impacted how she treated an African-American student during class.

I was standing at the door and a student was walking in looking upset. So, I said, 'Good morning, how are you doing?' The student said she was fine, but I knew something was wrong, so I gently asked again. The student went on to share an issue at home. I knew she was not going to focus that day. So, because I was tuned in, I knew not to push her but instead love and support her that day.

The simple act of standing at the door before class was another way the participants were able to connect with students.

Beyond standing at the door all participants mentioned connecting with students during class. Andrea said, “I try to have a conversation with each student each day and know who they are. The relationship aspect is key to engaging students. Students will perform and behave for a teacher that they know cares.” Connections seem to come in the small moments as Thomas loves to “mingle and interject in students’ casual conversations.” Maria expressed the importance of “being present in every moment of class.” Although the small conversations are important it may be equally important to remember what the students tell you in the conversations. Similar to many participants Sara expressed that “remembering what the students tell you and using the information in future helps the students know you are genuine when you ask them about themselves.” Likewise, Carter felt that remembering celebrations and issues in his African-American students’ lives builds connections. Carter said,

I use a notecard in my desk to write down important moments for my students like if they say, ‘my mom is having surgery, or I have a dance competition.’ When I ask them about something, they told me, I can see on their face they feel noticed.

The conversation does not need to happen in the classroom. Maria, Sara, and Kate all mentioned showing up to students’ extracurricular events. Maria mentioned “The conversations when they see you at their event are fun. They light up when they see you show up.” Kate described how she engages students all day, “I engage with them in and out of the classroom, you know, every now and then I’ll try and go down to lunch room and just dig into what they’re doing there or interact with them in the hallway.” Many participants show up to sporting events and concerts just so students can see them in the crowd. Andrea said, “The next day they are excited to say I saw you at the game or concert or whatever. I know my face in the crowd means a lot even if I am only there 10 minutes.”

Many participants mentioned the vulnerability of high school connections. Andrea expressed that high school students “don’t know how much they need adult connections.” One way to build a better connection is to have one on one interactions with students. Amanda learned the importance of one on one conversations from her mentor teacher. Amanda said, “My mentor teacher told me to have quiet conversation with each student on a regular basis. Sometimes the conversations are quick other times it lasts longer, and I know the student needed that moment.” Kim described the one on one time as “loving the kids” and Sara emphasized the need for “easy casual conversations.” Maria summed up the importance of knowing her African-American students when she stated, “I know I may be the only adult voice in their life that day, so I ask questions and listen.”

During the second focus group, Andrea mentioned, “My experience has taught me that with African American children, you have to establish a like a relationship with them.” Kim made connections between a white teacher and African American students. She responded,

I would say that and being a white teacher, I think the biggest thing was that you had to build a lot of trust. I think that the kids had a lot of misgivings, like when they walk into a white teacher's classroom. You know, they have their biases, just like, you know, a white teacher has biases. And I think that sometimes kids walk in and they're, they're already feeling on guard, like, is this lady going to like me? Is she going to treat me fair? Is this going to be another, you know, another semester down the tubes like what's going to happen, and I really feel like so much of it is gaining trust.

Kate seemed skeptical and stated, “So gaining trust period, no matter if you're, you know, male teacher, black teacher, white teacher.” Sara thought the school environment may be a factor. Sara said, “I agree trust is important in all contexts but if the school environment makes the kids

feel off or some teachers are against them a white teacher may need to work harder to make the African-American kid feel safe.” Kim agreed, “Yeah, sometimes kids don’t always feel safe. They are skeptical so I have to work to build trust.” Andrea commented, “All students need the relationship, but it may be more critical for some.” The participants of the focus group all nodded in agreement with Andrea. Kim ended the discussion by saying “Kids wanna be known.”

In her journal Andrea described a time that intentional conversations impacted an African-American student’s connection to her and the school:

A new student started two weeks into the beginning of the year as a ninth grader. By this time students had settled into their friend groups and routines. Each day I focused on having a moment of conversation with the new student. She was quiet at first but after a couple of days she started to talk about her interest. Two months later she came to my classroom at lunch in tears. She expressed that she was not making friends. She also told me that she was very outgoing and had lots of friends at her old school. I was shocked because she was so reserved now. We spent at least two to three lunch periods talking about the issue. I was able to guide her to how to connect with students in her grade and other grades as well. She continued to struggle with friends for the rest of ninth grade but by October of 10<sup>th</sup> grade she blossomed. I began to see the girl she had talked about. Throughout high school she would stop by room just to talk. After graduation she wrote me a note about how those little conversations in the classroom let her know she could come to me about anything. I always saw the conversations as a way to get to know student interest and help with classroom management. Now I see conversations as way to let students know they have one person they can always come talk to.

***Relationships encourage learning.*** The second subtheme demonstrated the teachers' beliefs that relationships impacted learning. Relationships allow the teacher to know the students' interests. The teacher can use this information to connect the students' interest to the content area. Of the participants, 81% mentioned using student interest as a connection point for students. Kim expressed the importance of connecting to student interest.

If I'm teaching ratios and proportions and all of a sudden, I'm like, okay, we're going to use, a pitchers ERA, or we're going to use a batters batting average then the boys are going to be drawn in and then I find another example to draw in the girls.

Sara allows student interest to drive the types of projects students complete. Sara allows students to "create their own projects sometimes they say let's talk about this thing and let's come up with a solution to this issue, so I go with it and let them research and explore." For Kate connections are not only student interest but the African-American students' culture. Kate uses culture to teach content. Kate mentioned:

I always make analogies I'll say, give me a song you're listening to right now. What are some of the lyrics? Then I'm honing in on language. If I'm teaching a piece of literature, I say 'think of the last movie you saw. What was going on?' And then I'm a connecting setting, and characters. I have them find the climax in the plot of the movie. Then I say 'That's the same as literature. It's just like watching a movie.' I don't believe also in just saving Black History of black literature to February. I do it all year. I infuse it all year. You know, Langston, we just finished talking about Langston Hughes and why they all had to be in Harlem all that time. You know, why they all ended up going overseas to Europe. So, we just had that conversation the other day.

Rose mentioned the connections to African-American student culture and interests “engage the students with a subject they may not like.” John not only believes in connecting the content to the students’ interest and culture but recognizes that he must be flexible. John stated:

So, I think, to make to go along with relevancy. I think it's important to, to know the students and it could change you know, from time to time it. And so, it's fluid, it fluctuates you know as far as, you know, the interest of students so you find and implement creative ways to make it relevant.

Many teachers indicated they believe student relationships will motivate students to learn and engage. Regarding working in class when the students do not like the subject Carter expressed:

They’ll do it because of who the person is in front of them, sometimes not so much the content. They’ll do it because you asked them to do it not necessarily because they like to do it, but because they know you care. They would do it because you've asked them, and they do feel safe.

Similarly, Andrea stated, “My students may not like math, but they work because I have made a personal connection with them. Most students want to please the teacher when they feel cared for.” Rose explained that in her classroom students express that “they hate the math but love the class.” The relationship with the teacher encourages students to give effort. Lynn stated:

You know most of my students hate the math, but I can get many of ones who disengage to reengage with a one on one conversation. Since I know them, I know how to talk to them. They trust me and will try.

Thomas recognized that when he first began teaching, he did not value student relationships. He noticed that things changed when he gets to know students. Thomas stated, “Now that I get to

know them, I see how much easier it is to just ask them to do the work. Ya gotta know them first.”

*Relationships engage the unengaged.* The participants used the relationships to understand why students disengaged or were unmotivated to complete the work. All of the participants mentioned having private conversation with students who were unengaged or unmotivated. In relation to completing work, Rose stated,

I usually pull the kid to the side and say, you know, look, I've noticed that you haven't submitted this, or you're not paying attention in class. What can I do to better support you? Do you need more examples? Do you need maybe to sit in the front of the room? Do you need me to stay after school and help you? So just to try to get them to know I'm team hashtag whatever their name is, and I am here to help you.

Sara felt that process of taking a student from unengaged to engaged required “a talk outside of the classroom to connect on a personal level to find out what is important to them.” Maria expressed that with some students it takes longer to create relationships, but it will help with engagement. Maria explained:

Once you build that relationship with the student the hardest student in the world would do something for that teacher. They don't know you care, until they know you care, but if they think you're just there for the check or you just there you don't care about them, they're not going to react well at all. They aren't going to pay attention or work.

As Kate mentioned students “will have more to say and you will understand them better with private talks.” In her journal, Kate also discussed how she helped one African-American student engage and feel a sense of belonging.

A student's mother actually expressed that her daughter was unhappy at the school and was trying to purposely fail all her classes so she could be transferred; the only exception was that she enjoyed my class and my teaching. Mom expressed that her daughter didn't feel like she belonged. I felt a strong urge to reach out to the student as a result. So, I had a one-on-one conversation with the student. I told her I supported whatever decision she felt she wanted to make in regards to her high school choice, but failing her classes wasn't going to help her "case." I told her that even if she decided to transfer schools, those poor marks would go with her and I asked her if that would be the profile, she would want the new school to receive. I told her to take some time to think about it; I met with her a few other times during our seminar (study hall) period helping her with time management in her planner and just talking to her in general, and I deliberately called her during class discussions to allow her to voice her opinion, contribute to class discussions. Since then not only have her grades improved, but she's joined student council, and she was a tour guide during our school's open house. I'd like to think my talk, inclusion and extra attention contributed to her change.

Of the participants, 54 % discussed the need to offer students grace for days when the student found it challenging to be attentive. As Kate explained, "Knowing each of them allows you to know when to push and when to back off." Kate allows students to have self-elected breaks. Kate described:

I have what's called a just like a de-stress corner where they can go and color. It's up on the wall. It's one of those coloring pages. It's like a big poster. Just go take a break and go color, you know.

Other participants look for signs that students need a break. Amanda found that students who lack attention will be attentive after she tells them to “go take a walk and get some water.” Rose watches her students’ moods and gives students free days while maintaining high expectations.

She described:

I do recognize that we're all human. And sometimes you just need, like, I don't want to say a break, you just need a little bit of time just to debrief. I give everyone what I call like a day grace, I think that as long as you kind of tell me, Look, this is what my situation is. You know, can I get a pass today? Sure. So, I think that they understand that I give them you know, give them a pass, because everybody needs a pass now and then. But you still have to work, I still expect the best of you.

Lynn tries to incorporate a break for the entire class when she notices students not engaging. She will stop class and pull out a game. Lynn described one game:

I keep a foam ball with topics written on it. I throw it to students, and they talk about whatever topic their thumb lands on. The students have a ten-minute break, you know. Then we come back and they are more ready. Plus, we all learned something about each other. It adds fun.

Thomas knows students are “entitled to a bad day but the next day you have to be ready to go.” Thomas also tries to give the student time to “sit and do nothing.” Thomas said, “After a few minutes of nothing I ask the kid to do a small bit while I circle the room. When I come back, I give them another small bit.”

During the focus group Lynn expressed that “some students don’t work because they are lazy.” Immediately, Carter expressed, “I don’t think lazy would apply. You have to dig deeper and find out if the student is tired, what is going on at home, or what happened the day before.”

Rose responded, “I agree students want to do this. What student doesn’t want to be successful? Once you know them you can find out if it’s lack of understanding or life outside of the classroom.” Amanda countered with:

“I would use lazy with very few students, but I would say students intentionally avoid. We have to find out why. I usually say, ‘hey what’s going on?’ I find that they have other stuff going on. Sometimes it is self-discipline but hopefully I can help with that piece.”

The word lazy sparked a debate but ultimately everyone agreed that it come back to relationship. Carter was able to get nods from everyone with “whatever you want to call it we can influence them to work if we know the audience well.”

In the second focus group the participants were asked how they view the word lazy. Sara stated,

I think they want the easy road, they’re tired. They have to get really interested like have some sort of passion for it. Sometimes I can make that happen but sometimes they have to fail to be motivated.

Rose responded, “What student doesn’t want to be successful? We have to find out what’s going on, make connections, and pull them in.” Supportive of Rose, Kim expressed:

What they are doing they find mundane or they feel they are not going to be successful so why try. As teachers we have to build their confidence and that relationship is key.

You’ll see a kid doing crazy stuff in one class and being attentive in another. You gotta know them and make connections. You have to give them strategies to be successful.

Similar to the first focus group the word lazy was contentious but making connections was seen as the key to getting students motivated. Lorri ended the conversation with:

There have been students who appeared lazy or didn't seem connected, but I have to find something they could connect to and engage them more. I had to know them and what makes them excited. I take it upon myself to try to bring something out of them.

**Theme 2: Collaboration improves learning.** The second theme centered around collaboration. Every participant mentioned using groups to build community and create student-centered learning. The participants expressed how groups helped students learn from each other and took the pressure off the student and teacher. The subthemes of the second theme can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

*Sub-Themes of Collaboration*

Sub-Themes	Theme
Collaboration creates student-centered learning	Collaboration
Build student competence with groups	

***Collaboration creates student-centered learning.*** Many participants expressed that students learn better from peers. Andrea stated, "They don't wanna hear from me. I speak for 10-15 minutes and then they work in groups with me a guide." Carter felt that students working together forced students to work. Carter stated:

I can get up there and talk. I'm not going to talk for long because you're gonna tune me out. So, I'm going to talk for a certain period of time and then you're going to do something. So, they do the work. They can work together but they do the work.

Thomas echoed the thoughts of many participants by saying "When the students work together each kid has to be engaged or he's going to stick out like a sore thumb, so they just learn better."

Kim gave a different point of view when she stated, "They will hide if you let them. When they

have to show up for their groups it prevents hiding.” Maria knows student voice matters. Maria expressed, “ I may teach something for two or three days then I do turn and talk to your neighbor and the kid that didn’t get it understands from their neighbor. There is something about that peer to peer.”

Collaboration helps students take ownership of the learning. Taking ownership of learning looked different in the participants classrooms. Thomas had groups work on problems and then share out. Thomas said, “Students are in it together. They have a spokesperson to present a problem and I use group peer pressure to get them to not leave the spokesperson hanging. They want their person to be successful.” Similarly, when Kate has students in groups, “they know I may ask any of them a question and expect understanding.” Amanda wants lab partners to “stick together and be on the same page of the lab. It helps them own the lab and the understanding of the other person.” Although Carter says, “ I should be able to grab any lab book from the group and it be the same,” he also uses individual student ownership. Carter mentioned,

I put the question on the board, and I say, ‘Okay, I’m done leading discussion question.’ I say, ‘It’s your turn to lead discussion.’ And then I have these sticks that are numbered. And it corresponds to the roster. They each have a number. ‘Okay so and so you’re up’ So you never know who I’m going to call. But they have to be ready. They facilitate and take questions. So, they take ownership and teach stuff.

Likewise, Sara has students present material and finds that “if they can teach someone else then they understand it.” Maria uses students to lead the class as well. Maria said, “I like them to be independent and take ownership so when they lead, they feel it and it creates a culture in the classroom that supports learning.”

***Build student competence with groups.*** Collaborative groups are used to provide support for struggling students but helps successful students as well. Maria finds that groups help African-American students find their voice. Maria expressed:

I found a lot of small group activities aids learning as I am not the spotlight. The stronger kids take pride in explaining and the weaker kids soak it up. Now the learning is student-centered in groups, and it's more questioning everybody wins.

Many teachers agreed that groups with mixed ability work the best. Lynn stated, “When you do mixed ability the low and the high kid gains. That’s why when we had tracked classes the low classes were hard. Now you can build good groups.” Andrea explained that creating groups is a process. Andrea said, “I spend lots of times creating the perfect combination of abilities and personalities. When I find the perfect combo, I am not quick to change seats.” However, Kim recognizes that in some cases mixed ability groups are not possible. Kim sometimes puts “ all the struggling kids together and focus my time with them.” Kate sometimes will use pairs instead of groups so that “a high performer can help a low performer one on one.” In her journal Rose described how groups built a student’s confidence. Rose described:

As she worked in groups, I would call on her to answer. At first, she would not answer and would push to another peer. After building a relationship and encouraging her I began to use wait time. She started answering questions developed from the group. Then as I would walk around, I heard her helping others in her group. Her confidence was built in the small group and then she began raising her hand without prompting. She believed she could.

When students are working together, teachers are able to push more difficult material. Kate said, “ I use those groups to have deeper conversations and more critical thinking. Some

students are more willing to dig deep in a small group.” Thomas uses collaborative groups to “push the limits because they can bounce ideas off each other.” John use groups to have students “live the content by simulating situations.” During the focus group, Andrea stated, “I can use groups to set the tone. I give challenge problems to the groups and they do more than if I asked them to work alone. The groups give them confidence to keep going.” Sara agreed and stated, “You know, I can ask more of the groups because they lean on each other.” Kim added, “There are so many times my lower kids shine during group time. I give a problem and they are more willing to take the risk in a small setting.” In his journal Carter described how he is able to use collaboration to build critical thinking and independence.

The best example of giving students a sense of independence would be allowing students to create their own laboratory experiments and develop their own data. They were able to collaborate with each other and I didn't have to "hover" over them. I believe that this helped their confidence and critical thinking skills.

**Theme 3: Use Positive Reinforcement.** The participants felt that students need positive reinforcement to motivate and engage them in classroom activities. Most participants use consistent informal feedback to encourage students to continue to work when tasks are longer or more challenging. Teachers model the behaviors they desire from their students to demonstrate the need to engage with the content. The subthemes of the third theme can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

*Sub-Themes of Positive Reinforcement*

Sub-Themes	Theme
High expectations with support	Positive Reinforcement
Model the behavior you desire	

***High expectations with support.*** The importance of having high expectations and using supportive strategies to help students meet the expectations was expressed by 81% of participants. Andrea was passionate about high expectations and stated:

I believe in meeting each kid where they are but recognizing that you can move from there to where you need to be. You know, each kid is different, so my job is to figure out how to get you from where you are to the expectations I have for all students. I never lower my expectation. Kids will take the path of least resistance. I don't give that as an option. I hear students and parents say, 'math is not my thing.' Nope, that is an excuse let me show you that you can do this. Let me show you math is useful for you and your mama.

Similar to Andrea, eight other teachers expressed the importance of showing kids that they can do the work. The participants used a variety of strategies to help students to support students in their learning so they could meet the high expectations. In her journal Amanda, described how she helped an African-American student meet her high expectations.

A student who was a diligent, respectful student commented in class one time that I always graded labs harshly, and that he couldn't figure out why he was continually being marked down. I suggested he come in during lunch or after school, bringing his labs with him, so that together we might be able to figure out why he was getting points continually marked off. This was not what the student was expecting me to respond with, and within the week, he brought in his labs for us to analyze together. During his lunch period, it became apparent his continual problem was not fully answering the question that was being asked. He had not noticed this as a consistent reason for being marked off, but when we had three different labs in front of us, the issue was clear (I would circle the

portion of the question that was not addressed in the answer). Shortly thereafter, there was a direct increase in his lab grades. The student later expressed that he felt very cared for in my attempt to hold him accountable to a higher level of work, and that he appreciated the way I supported his efforts in becoming more successful. I was able to cultivate a very positive relationship with this student, feeling a mutual respect build between us. Though he was not a straight A student, he was able to cultivate a sense of pride in knowing what his best work looked like, and how his best work didn't have to always be great science, but sometimes simply a careful attention to detail.

One way the teachers encourage students is to use positive informal feedback. As students are learning difficult material or working on a challenging task, teachers provide them with constrictive criticism. The teachers show them where they are doing well and what they need to do to improve. Thomas described this process of assisting students when they feel stuck and may want to give up:

I always try to kind of backtrack like well where do you go? What have you done so far? And why did you do that? Usually there's some nugget in there that's down the right path. So, try to nudge them towards that right there but it's kind of just like you show them the successes right like you know you got something to work with here. Right, I point out the positive things and that they've done so far.

Kate encourages her students with regular feedback both written and verbal as well and uses it as a way to keep students motivated. Kate explained:

So, I give feedback verbally all the time. I try and give that same kind of feedback on their assignments. I write 'this is what you need to do next time, and this is what you did

well.' So, I think it's a kind combination of both verbal and written with positive comments. So yeah, I think it's both. Keeping them motivated, keeping them motivated. John wants his students to self-reflect on where they went wrong to prevent a similar result in the future. John described the process:

My philosophy is that when there's a failure or there's a setback, is what caused it? Why did something not go, you know, the way that you have perceived it to go. And then just to analyze every facet and every component upon why there was, you know, this failure, and then have challenged students to maybe think in a different light to say okay, then how can we go about, you know, pushing forward, still moving towards that goal realizing that we can grasp something positive from this and learned something.

All of the participants spoke of encouraging students as they circulated the room. Rose circulated the room and says, "You are killin' it today or you are on fire." Teachers felt the students want the verbal encouragement and other students are encouraged even when the teacher is speaking to another student. Maria explained, "When one group is not on task, and I praise a group for making progress I immediately see the off-task group hitting the book. They all want the praise, so I give it to them."

All of the participants expressed that the issue with many students is confidence. During the focus group Lynn stated, "They just aren't confident. They don't believe they can you know. So, I show them by pointing out when they are doing the work, they find impossible." In her journal, Kim provided a story for showing an African-American student he was completing work that he thought was impossible.

A boy said I don't do well at story problems. I pulled out the text and showed him all the problems he has done successfully. I reminded him that story problems are word

problems. Our whole text is word problems. I told him that he was already doing well with story problems. His face lit up and he told me I was right. Don't say what you don't do well because we grow and change. What we don't know how to do yesterday we may master tomorrow. I want all my students to get that point.

The process of using questioning along with positive feedback to build confidence was mentioned by three participants. Maria explained her process:

so it's all about the questioning, because [...] I'm evaluating[...] what their level of understanding is and asking the questions to the point where if they're here, and if I have to backtrack and ask questions that are lower, of course they don't know that I'm asking lower, but I'm asking lower to find out where they are, but at the same time moving it back lower low enough to where they can see for themselves without me telling them the answer. Oh, and then I have you. You believe you can.

Teachers also support students by providing multiple ways to engage with the content.

Providing new or different resources is one way to help students learn and engage. John expressed:

I realized that students have all different types of learning styles, so to try to incorporate as many learnings teaching strategies within that, you know, for audio visual, you know I like to just mix things up where I have students do more student centered things where they'll kind of take charge of it and research and find out you know the content of the information on their own. More questioning, you know I like to approach things from a lot of questions where the students will have to do further inquiry. Or I may also have students pretend to be in the time period.

Sara stated, “I give them extra resources to help them get it. And I might call them aside and be like you're doing great, like, well this is what have you done well today instead of like you can't do.” Kim recognizes that each student may learn differently so the teacher should provide multiple ways to engage with the material. Kim offers students opportunities to use an actual worksheet, technology, or work at the board. Kim explained her reasoning, “Some students need to stand and work, or use manipulatives to see the math. Others just need to sit and practice so, like you have to provide the tools to meet each need.” Amanda uses different resources to proactively help students. Amanda stated, “It's trying to frontline. And provide supports for aiding understanding before you get to the struggle bus. So, this unit, I've been spending a lot of time working with graphic organizers which helps visual learners.” For some teachers, the way students engage does not have to be based on the teacher's ideas. Kate uses projects as a way for students to come up with their own plan. Kate explained:

They come in thinking they have to write what I want them to write. I want you to write what you feel. I want you to decide how you want to express what you know. Trust your feelings. It is hard to get them to trust it. There's no wrong answer. There's no wrong answer. You can do whatever. You got this.

Along with multiple ways to engage with the content, some participants expressed the need to break the material down into smaller parts. Amanda understands that her subject is difficult for some students, so she intentionally simplifies the material. Amanda stated:

I try to break it down. I try to break it down into small bite sized chunks. And a lot of students complained that I tested and quizzed a lot because I tried to do it over smaller pieces of content, but it works.

Thomas and Rose both mentioned the need for stepping students through the math. Rose stated, “I break it down, so they understand the small parts and then we put it back together. It provides the support.” Thomas does the same process and believes “they need to see the pieces sometimes, so I give them pieces.” Kate found that large tasks overwhelmed her students, so she has a new approach. Kate described her approach:

And when I gave research papers, it became more of a tedious task, instead of a valuable task. They didn't see the value in it was more like, Oh, I got to make this long. And even though I tried to teach him how to find citations, and how you know, the block citations can make your paper you know, just make it longer. So, I'm really struggling with finding the value in teaching them by giving them a long assignment. And what I'm trying to focus more on they are the skills that they need. So, no matter how long the assignment is, they can do it. Does that make sense? So, I'm more of a skills approach than task oriented.

The process of breaking down the material is another way to motivate students with positive reinforcement.

***Model the behavior you desire.*** All of the participants expressed the need to show students that the subject is exciting. Particularly when students are not engaged or motivated the students need to see that the class can be entertaining. Teachers accomplish this by lightening the mood with humor and enthusiasm. Teacher model how students should approach mistakes in the learning process.

The participants all agree that engagement begins with the teachers having enthusiasm in the classroom. Amanda knows that students are not always engaged in her class and may not like the subject. Amanda explained:

I can even light stuff on fire and there's some students that are just going to continue not paying attention. So, when I can be extra animated, and I am energetic and enthusiastic they can't help but watch me. I may be loud and energetic, but it gets their attention. I know that if I'm having fun, and you're having fun, we can get some chemistry done.

John also remains animated throughout class to keep students' attention and John believes "it is more how I say it rather than what I say." Sara believes that her energy is transferred to her students. Sara stated, "I think the more excited I am about it the more excited they are. So, I try to bring that every day." Similarly, Carter uses all of energy in the classroom to "model the energy he wants from the students." Carter explained:

I'm energetic from the time I hit the door 'til it's over. But after it's over with I'm tired. Because I have to have the same energy for each class, because, really, if you don't care about your content, you're not energetic, they're not either.

Kim also believes that energy is important and used enthusiasm as a "hook for kids to wonder what will happen that day." Rose feels that every day to be a bit different to "drive some excitement and anticipation."

In addition to enthusiasm the participants lighten the mood with humor. Thomas begins the class with "the dad joke of the day." Andrea infuses humor throughout the hour and the kids listen to hear what she will say next. Andrea mentioned:

I weave jokes in with the lesson so when kids start laughing and you weren't paying attention the kid wants to know what they missed. Hey, you gotta be listening because you never know what I will say. Many kids have told me that they still don't like math, but my class is entertaining. What they don't get is they learned the math because I got

them to pay attention. Whatever it takes, math is not a favorite, but whatever it takes. I'll play the crazy teacher.

Sara uses humor as well and finds it lightens the mood. Sara said, "I play games and like to joke around. The kids will join in and realize it doesn't have to be serious, but we get it done." Lynn thinks it is important to lighten the mood because "kids bring baggage and they have to let go to be able to learn so humor helps."

To go along with the humor and enthusiasm the teachers express the desire to encourage students when they make a mistake. Many participants model that mistakes are normal and are a part of learning. Rose combines humor to encourage students to embrace mistakes. She explained:

I said, I mess up all the time. And I said, I get paid to do this. I'm like, I went to school for this. And then I think that kind of eases the tension. Sometimes I'm like, we all make mistakes, like we're human. So, I think knowing that I am okay with making a mistake, I'm okay with admitting that I made a mistake and correcting a mistake. It kind of lets them feel okay. Like, oh, if I make a mistake, it's okay. Because I can always go back and correct whatever error that I made. So, they know it's like, it's not a big deal.

Kim highlights her mistakes by passing out passes worth test points if a student catches her mistake. Kim said, "I tell them like I make mistakes and when they respectfully point it out, I give them a little cut out animal. They can turn them in for extra credit. It makes mistakes normal and like they love it." Amanda encourages students to take risks. She reminds students that, "Okay if you're wrong, like what's the worst that happens. Oh, you learn something new, oh bummer that's like what we're here for. When you're wrong is when learning happens." Sara uses positive encouragement to help students move past mistakes. Sara said, "Even if they get

something wrong, I'm like, all right, like what where we coming from? What do you think? Expand upon that.”

In her journal, Andrea discussed how she helped an African-American student feel comfortable with taking risks even if there may be mistakes.

The first step to students being successful in math is building a relationship and reinforcing that you are there to support them, want the best for them (not only in math) and fostering an environment of safe learning and “mistake” making in the room . I had a student who was unsure of her ability but as the year progressed, I worked with her to get to her to experience success. At the beginning of the year, she was so afraid to answer questions unless she was absolutely positive, she had the right answer. I encouraged her when she made mistakes by pointing out the positive and the portions that were on track. I focused on her strengths when she struggled to learn the concepts quickly. I encouraged her to try every problem in her homework and worked with her to contribute her thoughts in her group. She slowly began to contribute to her group by asking and answering questions. She began to shrug at mistakes and continue working without giving up. After a while she was even answering questions in front of the entire class. The process of ensuring each student feels competent can vary by student and often takes months to see the fruits of your labor.

When teachers model the behaviors, they would like from students, students feel more comfortable displaying the same behaviors.

### **Research Question Responses**

The central questions and the guiding questions were answered through the interview, journals, and focus groups. The research questions sought to describe the lived experiences of

teachers as they created supportive classroom environments to encourage African-American students to graduate. Specifically, the guiding questions focused on the teachers building confidence, independence and choice, belonging, and engagement. The three themes of building relationships, collaboration, and positive reinforcement supported all of the research questions.

**Central Research Question.** The central question was, “What have been the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers with creating supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate in Southeastern Michigan?” The participants expressed that they each play a role in the encouragement of African-American students. The participants each experienced setting up a classroom environment that included building teacher-student-relationship, creating collaboration among students, and using positive reinforcements to encourage students. All three of the themes that were found describe the participants experiences with creating the supportive classroom. The teacher-student relationship provided opportunities to engage the unengaged and to encourage students to learn. Participants use the relationship to know students which drives how the teachers interact and teach the students. The collaborative groups allow the students to drive the learning and builds competence. Lastly, the positive feedback supports students as they work through the learning process and allows the teacher to model how students should approach learning.

**Guiding Question One.** Guiding question one was, “How do high school teachers describe experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment by building students’ self-confidence in learning?” The themes of collaboration and positive reinforcement describe how the participants build self-confidence. The teachers use both to help students feel competent in the subject. Specifically, the sub theme of engaging students with student-centered learning addresses this question. Collaboration allows students to learn from one another and helps

students believe they have the ability to do the work. Rose felt that groups allow students to “lean on each other” As Carter discussed as students interact with each other students they begin to see that “learning the subject is possible.” Similarly, several other participants described how groups allow students to struggle through challenges without as much risk. Andrea mentioned, “Students need support in math and groups do that. You say confidence and they get that from each other.” Kim also expressed that “groups show students they can do tough tasks.” The collaborative groups build confidence as student realize they are not alone. The students are able to complete the work as they work alongside of their peers.

In addition to using collaborative groups, participants use positive reinforcement. By providing support while maintain high expectations participants expressed, they are able to build confidence. As Lynn stated, “They just need to believe they can.” The participants all linked competence to the teacher encouraging students that the work was doable. John believes that students have to know the task is “in their reach.” In his journal, Thomas described an experience with an African-American student who transferred to the school and felt behind and not as smart as the other students. Thomas wrote:

First, I pulled her to the side and tried to figure out why she was not engaging. I figured out it was a lack of confidence. She always seemed to just sit on the edge and never engage. Based on the questions she asked I knew she didn’t think she was good enough. I started saying something positive every time I passed her desk. Before she knew I was standing over her shoulder I would say, ‘You got this!’ or ‘You are on the right track, keep going.’ Within a couple of weeks, she was asking great questions and answering others. She became the leader in her group and pulls the others. She just needed to know she could compete with the other students in the honors class.

All of the participants expressed that they use some form of verbal or written positive feedback to build competence in the classroom. Carter described how he uses verbal feedback to allow students to push themselves to learn. Carter stated, "I just use verbal encouragement . You're not walking them through you let them discover. I tell them they can do it because a man wrote this book and he had to learn it, I had to learn it." The consistent positive reinforcement builds students confidence in their ability to learn. As Kim mentioned "students feel competent when they feel supported."

**Guiding Question Two.** Guiding questions two was, "How do high school teachers describe experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment by building students' independence and offering choice?" The theme of collaboration answered part of the second guiding question. Students' independence was supported through the groups. Participants felt that collaborative groups allowed students to take ownership of the learning. As Maria described, collaborative groups create "a student-centered learning environment." The groups take the pressure off teacher and the students begin to "drive the lesson." An example is Sara's students "creating their own projects" to learn the content. All of the participants use collaborative groups to help students learn and eight of them expressed how it also helped students gain independence. Lynn believes that without groups students would "lean on the teacher and not try difficult problems." Collaborative groups build independence and focuses the attention on the students learning.

The second part of the questions focused on choice. Only 27 % of participants felt they intentionally build choice into the classroom. Many teachers expressed that choice was not important to the creation of the supportive classroom. Kim stated, "Choice can be tricky because they don't know how to handle it." However, in his journal Thomas described how he used

choice “by having students decide on which project they would complete.” Similarly, Sara allows students to decide on the projects they will do. Kate wants students to choose the direction of their writing. Overall the consensus was choice was not an important factor in motivation and engagement. Choice did not appear as a part of the three themes. However, participants did focus on building autonomy through student ownership. Students were given the opportunity to lead in the classroom. Carter stated, “The students facilitate the questioning and take questions. I know they don’t want to hear me talk so they lead.” Student leadership in the classroom provides students with a sense of independence even without choice.

**Guiding Question Three.** Guiding question three was, “How do high school teachers describe experiences with building a sense of belonging to create a supportive classroom environment?” The question was answered with the theme of relationships. The theme of teacher-student relationships was unanimous among participants. Each participant mentioned the need to know the students and build relationships with students several times. Carter echoed many participants when he said, “getting to know the students is key.” The result of teacher-student relationship is multifaceted as teachers use knowledge about students to make connections to their lives, encourage students to persevere, and know when to give grace. The most profound statement which was mentioned by six participants was the fact that relationship leads to students doing work even when they hate the subject. As Carter expressed the relationship encourages the students to work because they “feel safe.” All of the participants statements aligned with Amanda when she said, “the relationship impacts learning and discipline.”

As the participants intentionally got to know each student, they were able to connect learning to students interest. As Andrea expressed students “will listen and learn if the content is

interesting.” The participants made the content interesting by learning about the culture in the classroom. In her journal, Amanda described how she connected a movie that her African-American students loved to her content.

I had many African-American students throwing out the word 'Vibranium' in my class often. After watching the movie Black Panther myself, I created an assignment that incorporates watching segments of the movie, taking note of the characteristics of Vibranium, which is a fictional metal, and using these characteristics to classify the substance as a metal, nonmetal, or metalloid. I know many students were excited about the assignment, because it allowed them to feel connected to their culture in my classroom.

The intentional relationship building allows teachers to be aware of trends in the students' lives and use opportunities to make the content relevant to the students. The participants felt that the connections and relevancy increased learning in the classroom.

**Guiding Question Four.** Guiding question four was, “How do high school teachers describe experiences with using engagement to create a supportive classroom environment?” Engagement was found in all three themes. As a subtheme of relationships was the fact that getting to know students allowed teachers to engage the unengaged student. When a student is unengaged participants felt that the relationship allowed them to have a conversation to find out what would motivate them. John expressed that when a student was unengaged “it goes back to relationship and knowing what students are interesting in, you know, to use that to make connections.” Sara mentioned that she uses relationship to “have tough conversations about what students need to do.” Students can be reengaged through the relationship and sense of belong teachers create.

The relationships allow the teacher to connect the content to student interest and culture. The connection makes the learning relevant and increases engagement. Specifically, teachers wanted African-American students to see their culture represented in the classroom. John stated:

And so, there's been this disconnect because you know many African American students haven't seen the relevancy of history because they say oh it's just like a white man's story, you know, and so, so I would say that it is. It's fundamental that students are able to see their race, their connection, their culture, throughout the story of American history.

Rose mentioned, "Student are excited when they can see themselves, like weaved into the lesson. So, I try to find ways to allow them to like see their world in math." Participants expressed that engagement often is related to whether the students value the learning. During the focus group, Kate discussed how relevant topics aided engagement.

At my school we're predominantly African-American. So just having conversations just about leaders, famous leaders beyond Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. We took the students to see Harriett last week and just some of the conversations were telling. The students were eager to write about it and like did their own research without prompting on what part was true and what was made up and what was glamorized.

Engagement can be tied to how the content is presented as a direct connection the interest of the students. When teachers know the students, the teacher can make the content relevant. African-American students benefit from teachers connecting the content specifically to African-American culture and interests.

The theme of collaboration in the classroom also affects engagement. The subtheme of student-centered learning allows teachers to easily see when a student is unengaged. Thomas stated that with collaborative groups students "stick out" when they are unengaged. Since the

teachers can identify the unengaged students, they can help the student reengage. Also, groups provided a more engaging environment for students. Similar to other participants Maria felt that groups gave students the opportunity “to be more open to dialogue.” Students feel protected in the small group in a way that large group instruction cannot provides. Participants expressed that collaboration in groups provided student centered opportunities which engaged the students and removed the focus from the teacher. Students take ownership which improves engagement.

Lastly, the subtheme of positive feedback was modeling positive behaviors. Participants described the way their enthusiasm transferred to the students. John expressed, “My energy can be contagious the class. You know students will be willing to show that they are excited because I am excited.” The participants believe when the teacher bring enthusiasm and humor the students will engage and participate. Also, when the classroom mood is lightened by the teacher’s humor the students will pay attention. Andrea believes the humor “draws them in and lets them know they can joke and have fun.” Maria stated, “The positive environment like reengages and energized the room.”

### **Summary**

Three themes emerged from this study which supported the four research questions. The lived experiences of the teachers creating a supportive classroom for African-American students involve building relationships, creating collaborative groups, and using positive reinforcement. The participants use relationships to create a sense of belonging and to engage students. Collaboration builds autonomy and makes students feel competent. Lastly, positive reinforcement builds competence and encourages engagement. All of the themes support students by building motivation and engagement in the classroom. The supportive environment allows students to feel connected and confident. The narrative of the participants experiences

show that belonging is a critical part of the supportive classroom. Engagement was weaved into each theme which demonstrates the emphasis the teachers place of maintaining engagement in the classroom.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers who have created supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate. The current study found that teachers use teacher-student relationships, collaborative groups, and positive reinforcement to motivate and engage African-American students in the classroom. The teacher-student relationships created a sense of belonging in the classroom and encouraged engagement. The collaborative groups built ownership of learning and increased the sense of competence. The positive reinforcement aided in building competence and engagement in classroom. Each research question has been answered with the three themes. The study posits that competence is built through collaboration and positive reinforcement, and independence is supported with collaborations. Teachers create a sense of belonging by intentionally building relationships and using the relationships to make the learning relevant. Lastly, engagement is supported by all three themes of relationships, collaboration, and positive reinforcement.

The descriptions of the lived experiences of teachers provides useful details for teachers, administrators and teacher education programs. The findings from the current study can aid stakeholders with creating a supportive classroom using relationships, collaboration, and positive reinforcement. The study also supports previous literature about the importance of building competence and belonging in the classroom. The study deviates from the component of autonomy which supports choice in the classroom. However, the study does support creating autonomy support through relationships, ownership, and feelings of competence. The

delimitations and limitations are also discussed in this chapter. Lastly, the recommendations for future research are provided.

### **Summary of Findings**

The study found that teachers who have created supportive classroom environments for African-American students focus on relationships, collaboration, and positive reinforcements. Teachers build relationships with students by intentionally engaging them in conversations. The conversations helped the teachers connect the learning to students' interest. The teachers also reported that the relationships aid the teachers in encouraging students to persevere in difficult tasks. Teachers use collaborative groups to create a student-centered learning environment which builds competence and autonomy. Positive reinforcement encourages students with positive feedback. Teachers reported helping students feel competent through regular informal feedback. The positive classroom environment also helped students remain engaged in the classroom.

The central research question was “What have been the perceptions and lived experiences of high school teachers with creating supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate in Southeastern Michigan?” The participants in the current study worked in schools with high graduation rates for African-Americans and had the shared experience of creating an environment that supported perseverance toward graduation. As the participants shared their experiences three themes emerged. The three themes of relationships, collaboration, and positive reinforcement supported the central research question. The participants expressed that a supportive classroom encompassed building relationships, using collaborative groups, and providing positive reinforcement. The participants used relationship, collaboration, and positive reinforcement to keep students motivated and engaged. The teacher-

student relationship created a sense of belonging which participants felt helped students stay motivated even during difficult tasks. The teachers were also able to connect the content to student interest which aided engagement. Collaboration also built community in the classroom and allowed students to learn from peers. The student-centered classroom supported students' engagement as the focus was placed on the student and not the teacher. Regular positive encouragement engaged students by providing a feeling of competence. The students engaged in the content as the teacher lightened the mood for the students.

Guiding question one was “How do high school teachers describe experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment by building students’ self-confidence in learning?” Teachers used collaboration and positive reinforcement to build African-American students’ self-confidence. The collaborative groups allowed students to be a part of a student-centered classroom. The student-centered classroom allowed students to work through the content with the teacher as a facilitator. As a result, the students learned to critically think and with the help of their peers they were able to tackle difficult tasks. The groups allowed students to learn from each other and notice that everyone makes mistakes. The group dynamic in the classroom supported students’ competence.

Participants built competence by maintaining high expectations while supporting African-American students. The participants supported students by breaking the content down for students and providing regular positive feedback. Participants expressed that smaller tasks aided students’ confidences as the work seemed doable. Also, participants found something positive in students work that the students could build on to help them feel as if they could complete the tasks. The consistent informal feedback supported the correct thinking while fixing

any incorrect assumptions about the content. The positive reinforcement supported the students' sense of competence in learning.

Guiding question two was "How do high school teachers describe experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment by building students' independence and offering choice?" Collaborative groups provide African-American students with opportunities to have independence in the classroom. The student-centered learning gives students opportunities to explore the content for themselves. Participants also use the groups to have students explore the learning with support from their peers. Most participants did not offer choice in their classroom. Although the participants used student interest to guide their teaching, the participants do not allow the students to have choice in a significant way in the classroom. Many participants felt that choice was not a necessary component of motivation and engagement. However, the participants do create a sense of ownership in the classroom by allowing students opportunities to lead. The student-centered opportunities were provided through the use of collaborative groups and group activities. The participants accomplished building autonomy in the classroom through student ownership in a student-centered classroom environment. Although the students did not experience choice, autonomy was supported through relationships and a student-centered classroom environment.

Guiding question three was "How do high school teachers describe experiences with building a sense of belonging to create a supportive classroom environment?" Participants use teacher-student relationships to create sense of belonging in the classroom. The teacher-student relationships allow African-American students to feel known by the teacher as the participants expressed intentionally getting to know each student. The relationships allow the teacher to connect the content to student interest which aids the sense of belonging. Also, teacher-student

relationship allows the teacher to know how and when to approach students. Participants expressed that relationships allow the student to feel known in the classroom.

The teacher-student relationships created a sense of belonging as teachers were able to use the relationships to connect the learning to the students' culture and interests. As the teachers learned about what was important to the students, lessons were created to highlight how the content connected to the interest. The participants also expressed the importance of ensuring that the lessons were culturally relevant. Teachers expressed intentionally connecting content to the African-American students culture to make the lessons relevant for the students. The sense of belonging created through the teacher relationships aided learning as the students were more engaged and ready to learn.

Guiding question four "How do high school teachers describe experiences with using engagement to create a supportive classroom environment?" The results of the current study supported the research that engagement is an outcome of motivation. Therefore, all three themes work together to engage students. Participants felt strongly that the key to engagement was building a relationship with the students. The relationship helped students not only feel belonging but encouraged engagement. The participants expressed that students would engage more in a class if the teacher had built a relationship first. The relationship allowed the teacher to know students interest and connect the content to various students' interest. The participants felt that students were more engaged when they either liked the teacher or the connection to student interest.

Collaboration also aided in engaging students. The groups created a student-centered classroom which prevented students from disengaging as they worked with peers. Also, the groups prevented students from hiding in the classroom as each member of the group was

expected to participate. The peers also encouraged one another to contribute and support learning in the groups. Many participants expected every person in the group to be able to share with the class which encouraged the students to ensure everyone was prepared. The groups make it more difficult for students to disengage as the students and the teacher are more aware of the level of participation.

The positive reinforcement by modeling enthusiasm also helped African-American students engaged. The participants felt that when they lightened the mood with humor or enthusiasm, the students would engage. The teachers modeled enthusiasm for the subject and the students responded with a level of enthusiasm. The participants felt that students will only be excited about the content if the teachers were excited about the content. Also, participants often used humor or fun activities to keep the students engaged in the lesson. The energy in the room created through humor aided in students paying attention.

### **Discussion**

This study confirms both empirical and theoretical literature. Motivation and engagement are the key to increase academic achievement for African-American students (Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The current study described the lived experiences of teachers as they created the supportive environment to foster engagement and motivation in schools with high graduation rates for African-American students. In alignment with self-determination theory, the participants focused on belonging and competence in the classroom (Deci et al., 1991). However, the participants did not offer choice in the classroom as suggested by previous studies (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). However, participants did support autonomy by creating an environment with student ownership. Although choice is a part of autonomy, participants created a student-centered classroom where students could take

ownership of learning which may provide autonomy support (Wallace & Sung, 2017).

Participants' responses in the current study supported previous literature while providing a new lens as the lived experiences of the participants was described.

### **Relationship to Empirical Literature**

Several studies have found that African-American students have lower engagement and motivation which hinder perseverance toward graduation (Dotterer & Lowe, 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Vega et al., 2015; Zaff et al., 2017). Teachers have the ability to increase motivation and engagement in the classroom (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Specifically, increasing self-determined motivation for African-American students leads to higher academic motivation and engagement (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). The current study looked at the experiences of teachers intentionally building motivation and engagement for African-American students. Participants in this study felt that through building relationships, using collaborative groups, and positive reinforcement students were more engaged and motivated to learn. Similar to previous studies, this study found that relationships to the teacher and to peers is a key component of motivation and engagement (Patall et al., 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Relationships are enhanced through the use of collaborative groups (Reeve & Halusic, 2009). Unlike previous studies, the current study described the way teachers focused on building competence, relatedness, and autonomy in the classroom.

Engagement is a demonstration of intrinsic motivation (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). Froiland & Worrell (2016) found that engagement depends on whether the teacher can meet to needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Similar to previous studies, participants in the current study used relationships to connect learning to students'

interest as a way to increase engagement (Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Taylor et al., 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The connection to student interest is a way to encourage students to engage with the content. Participants reported using relationships with students to help students reengage in the classroom (Quinn, 2017; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Also, participants recognize the interest and culture of the students in the classroom and provide connections relevant to African-American students. Specifically, African-American students need teachers to have high expectations as well as a connection to teacher (Gay, 2018; Konold et al, 2016). Participants in the current study reported maintain high expectations while providing support for students.

Collaboration was a theme of this study. Collaboration created a student-centered classroom environment. Student-centered learning has been shown to increase engagement and motivation in the classroom. Students not only engage and learn better but also gain social skills (Talbert, Hofkens, & Wang, 2019). The social skills aid in creating community in the classroom. The sense of community makes students feel more comfortable sharing and expressing ideas in the classroom (Chou & Tumminia, 2017; Shernoff et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The current study supports the idea of using collaborative groups to build competence and engagement through student-centered learning for African-American students. Participants felt that the groups were critical for learning and took the focus off of the teacher and placed it on the students. Participants reported that students were more engaged and more likely to share ideas in a small setting rather than the whole classroom.

Positive affirmations are important to build competence and maintain motivation and engagement (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Reeve, 2006). Students have a need for positive feedback from teachers to increase the feeling of competence (Burns, Martin, & Collie, 2019; Cheon & Reeve, 2015). When students receive positive feedback from the teacher the student is motivated

to continue to pursue learning (Burns et al., 2019). Participants in the current study indicated that providing regular positive feedback kept the students motivated. Participants tried to find the positive in students' work even if the work was incorrect. The positive feedback was followed up with a redirect if necessary, to help the student continue in the right direction.

Culturally responsive teaching is thought to be a key component of engagement and motivation for African-American students. One aspect of culturally responsive teaching is making the content relevant for students (Gay, 2018). In the current study, participants intentionally sought conversations with participants for the purpose of learning students' interests. The participants used students' interest to design lessons to engage the students. When participants were asked about incorporating student culture, the responses centered more on students' interest. The participants viewed the student interest as a part of the culture of the student. This idea supports the components of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018). Another aspect of culturally responsive teaching is the idea of building competence. Culturally responsive teachers believe students have the ability to learn, hold high expectations, and work to help students view themselves as competent (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Mahatmya et al., 2016). Participants expressed that building students' self-confidence was critical. The participants used positive reinforcement and collaborative groups to build competence. Also, participants focused on high expectations while actively supporting students to ensure the students feel competent while completing challenging tasks. Lastly, culturally responsive teachers focus on belonging in a culturally safe environment (Callaway, 2017; Gay, 2018). Although, teachers did not report on the culturally safe environment, participants did focus on sense of belonging. Participants build a safe community by intentionally creating teacher-student relationships.

This study did not support previous studies which stated that choice is a key component of autonomy to build motivation and engagement in the classroom (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Wallace & Sung, 2017). The question of choice was a tough one for each participant. Although, three participants indicated they offered some form of choice, all participants indicated they did not offer choice as a regular routine in the classroom. However, autonomy support could also be accomplished by allowing students to have opportunities to take ownership of the learning (Shernoff et al., 2016; Wallace & Sung, 2017). Although participants did not often offer choice, the collaborative groups allowed the students to be the center of the learning environment. Participants did indicate that collaborative groups were a way to have students take ownership of their learning. The groups created a student-centered community which build independence. Also, studies have shown that focus on competence and relationship in the classroom may provide autonomy support (Quinn, 2017; Shernoff et al., 2016). Relationship was an important theme in the current study. All participants mentioned relationships as a primary way to increase motivation and engagement. Participants supported competence through the collaborative groups and also the positive reinforcement. Therefore, although choice was not always intentionally a focus in the classroom, the participants could be creating autonomy support through the relationships, collaborative groups, and positive reinforcement.

The current study provided new details on motivation and engagement as it described the participants experiences. The descriptions of the live experiences showed how teachers intentionally seek one-on-one conversations with students to build relationships from the beginning of the year. Teachers learn about students' moods and learn when to and how to encourage students. The study shed light on how student relationships could be used to make the content relevant to the students. This study showed that teachers notice when students are

unengaged and use the relationships and students' interest to create lessons to reengage students. Also, the detail of how collaborative groups are used to increase feeling of competence and engagement showed how collaborative groups are useful in the classroom. Lastly, the current study provided descriptions of how positive affirmations build competence and engagement.

### **Relationship to Theoretical Literature**

The theory that supported this study was the self-determination theory. This theory posits that intrinsic motivation has three basic psychological needs (Deci et al., 1991). Competence, relatedness, and autonomy all need to be met to build intrinsic motivation. Competence relates to a students' confidence that they can accomplish a task. Relatedness is a students' sense of belonging in the classroom (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Autonomy is a students' sense of independence and choice in the classroom (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012; Wallace & Sung, 2017). Often African-American students do not feel a sense of belonging or competence in the classroom as the teachers do not feel the students are competent (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Also, the teacher and student have a cultural mismatch which hinders an African-American student from feeling like they belong in the classroom (Gay, 2018; Milner, 2012). When African-American students miss out on competence and relatedness, the students may be less motivated and engaged (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Milner, 2012). Intrinsic motivation improves academic achievement (Cham et al., 2014; Deci et al., 1991; Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016). Intrinsic motivation increases a student's engagement in the classroom (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). However, extrinsic or controlled motivation hinders learning academic achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

The current study focused on teachers experiences with building supportive classroom specifically by meeting the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. The study found

that teachers intentionally focused on a students' feeling of competence in the classroom by using positive reinforcements and collaborative groups. Relatedness was built through intentional conversations to create teacher-student relationships. Participants expressed supporting autonomy through collaborative groups. However, participants only supported students sense of independence and did not often offer choice in the classroom. This study extends the theory by providing details on how teachers support competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Specifically, this study shows how teachers intentionally focus on sense of belonging for African-American students by building relationships. The participants in this study used collaborative groups to aid students in building competence as the students tackled difficult tasks as a group. Competence was also supported through positive reinforcement as teachers provided regular positive feedback to encourage students to persevere.

The current study confirms the previous theory that when competence and relatedness needs are met students will persevere and complete difficult tasks (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2012). Participants found that African-American students were willing to work harder for a teacher when a relationship had been established. Also, students would persevere when the student felt encouraged through positive reinforcement either from the teacher or a peer. The study was inconclusive as it relates to autonomy through choice in the classroom. Although participants felt that students had independence when they worked in groups, the question of choice gave each participant pause. A few participants mentioned choice in projects, but choice was not a consistent strategy used in the classroom and many participants reported not offering choice. The lack of choice while still achieving motivation in students raises the question of whether independence through collaborative groups is enough to build autonomy and whether or not choices is critical to intrinsic motivation. Emotional support has been seen as a way to

increase autonomy (Quinn, 2017; Reeve & Halusic, 2009). Emotional support is provided through independent tasks and relationships which participants reported (Ruzek et al., 2016). Therefore, participants may still be providing autonomy through the building of relationships and collaborative groups.

As an extension of self-determination theory, Reeve (2012) found that students may internalize or integrate motivation based on external forces. For instance, the participants each intentionally focused on sense of belonging from day one. The participants also used positive encouragement to bring energy to classroom each day. This may cause the students to find the work in the classroom as useful and increase intrinsic motivation even when the task is deemed unenjoyable. Reeve (2012) also found that the desire for competence and relatedness will lead students to internally regulate which may explain the success even with the lack of autonomy in the classroom.

### **Implications**

This study provides descriptions of the lived experiences for teachers who have created supportive classroom environments for African-American students. The descriptions provide details on how to build the components of self-determination theory in the classroom. The current study confirms and provides a descriptive narrative for the previous studies which detail the importance of motivation and engagement for African-American students. Teachers can use the descriptions in this study to inform their practice in classroom.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The current study supports previous findings on self-determination theory. Self-determination theory posits that students needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy must be met to promote intrinsic motivation (Cham et al., 2014; Deci et al., 1991; Fan & Wolters,

2014). Many studies have confirmed the importance of teachers creating a supportive environment to promote intrinsic motivation (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Shernoff et al., 2016; Zaff et al., 2017). However, the current study describes teachers' daily interaction with building competence, relatedness and autonomy. This study connects the components of self-determination and engagement in the classroom (Shernoff et al., 2016; Zaff et al., 2017).

The current study showed that teachers build competence by allowing students to learn and lean on one another with collaborative groups. All of the participants believed that collaborative groups builds competence and promotes perseverance. Participants use groups to allow students to help each other and learn from the mistakes of peers. Also, teachers provide positive reinforcement with regular informal feedback to point out the positive and encourage students to move in the right direction. The participants created belonging by getting to know the students with one on one conversations to learn about students and show care and concern. Peer relationships were built through the collaborative groups. Lastly, autonomy was achieved through the independence that was built in the collaborative groups. Unlike previous studies, the current study provides the perceptions of teachers on building components of self-determination (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Shernoff et al., 2016; Zaff et al., 2017). The study also informs the theory and provides practical ways teachers can implement the components of self-determination theory in the classroom.

### **Empirical Implications**

Many previous studies have connected high school graduation with the classroom and school environment (Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wang & Fredericks, 2014; Zaff et al., 2017). However, there was a gap in the literature providing the lived experiences of the teachers

creating the supportive environment to promote engagement and motivation in schools with high graduation rates for African-American students. The supportive classroom environment meets the students' needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy while engaging students in the content (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Shernoff et al., 2016). Engagement increases perseverance and achievement in the classroom (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Jang et al., 2016). The current study described the way teachers engage and motivate students and thereby providing a new perspective on motivation and engagement in the classroom.

In addition to building the components of self-determination theory, the current study showed how participants engage students by connecting to student interest and modeling enthusiasm for their subject. The African-American culture of the students was considered and weaved into the content when possible. Also, participants create a student-centered classroom to allow students to take ownership of their learning. All of the participants expressed throughout the interview that the key to motivation and engagement was teacher-student relationships. The result of the teacher-student relationships was the African-American students felt known. Participants felt that students engage because of the relationships built and the energy brought to the classroom each day. Participants described engaging unengaged students due to the relationship that was built from the beginning of the year. Similar to previous studies teachers have the ability to engage unengaged students when the focus is on the relationship (Quinn, 2017; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). However, the current study provided descriptions of teachers lived experiences with creating relationships and using the relationships to influence engagement. The descriptions of how teachers approach creating a supportive classroom add to the current research.

The current study demonstrated how building a supportive environment to promote motivation through competence, relatedness, and autonomy also was the key to engagement. Previous studies also linked the components of self-determination and engagement (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Wang & Fredericks, 2014). However, the current study provided the description of the teachers focusing on motivation and engagement. The participants described how relationships, collaboration, and positive reinforcement were critical to motivation and engagement. This study provides a description of the approaches teachers use to motivate and engage African-American students. Participants described how they build competence by using collaborative groups and positive reinforcement. Participants expressed how creating intentional student-centered activities, breaking the content down, and group activities increased the confidence of the students. Also, participants described how autonomy was approached as student-ownership rather than choice. Participants use collaborative groups to have students take ownerships of tasks and their learning. Relationships were the key to creating community and belonging in the classroom. Participants intentionally connected with each student and provided opportunities for students to connect with each other.

### **Practical Implications**

Motivation and engagement are critical components of promoting persistence in high school (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Wang and Eccles, 2013). The current study provided details on how to motivate and engage African-American students in the classroom. The descriptions allow other teachers to understand the way strategies are implemented and teachers' perceptions on how the strategies affect motivation and engagement. Teachers could use this study as a guide to motivate students. Teachers will not only see the importance of building relationships in the classroom but how to intentionally have daily

conversations with students. Teachers will read the description of how teachers use the information gained from student conversations to guide the lesson in the classroom. Also, the way collaborative groups are used not only for learning but also for building competence and engagement. Lastly, teachers will be able to connect the use of positive feedback to motivating and engaging students. This study provides practical information on how to use positive feedback regularly to increase competence and engagement.

Many teachers feel unprepared after college to motivate and engage African-American students in the classroom (Lambeth & Smith, 2016). Administrators can use the information from the current study to train teachers on how to build relationships, create collaborative groups, and use positive reinforcement to promote perseverance toward graduation for African-American students. The description provides anecdotes to aid in providing a clear picture of how the relationships, collaborative groups, and positive feedback can increase motivation. Also, this study provides professors with information on how to prepare preservice teachers for teaching. When participants were asked about how they developed their supportive classroom, they each described another teacher who guided them. However, teacher education programs could use this study to amend their programs and provide information on creating supportive classrooms as a part of their program.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are the boundaries set to define the study (Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2018). There were several delimitations in regard to the participants. First, the participants each had at least three years of experience in schools with high graduation rates for African-American students. The study sought to focus on teachers who work in schools that graduate more African-American students than the national average. The three years of experience allowed the

teachers to have spent time developing the supportive classroom environment. Second, the participants had to work at a school with at least 25% of the students identifying as African-American to ensure the teacher interacted with African-American students. Third, the current study used a phenomenological approach to allow the lived experiences of the teachers be described. Lastly, the study triangulated the data with interviews, journals, and focus group. The triangulation allowed for a confirmation of the themes derived from the study.

Limitation are the weaknesses in the study which could not be controlled (Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2018). The limitations of the current study were the sample of teachers who participated. Nine of the eleven participants were math or science teachers. The number of math and science teachers may have affected the themes; the number of math and science teachers may have occurred through snow-ball sampling as the first three teachers interviewed provided contact information for colleagues who were also math or science teacher. Due to the high number of math and science teachers, the themes provided in this study may only be generalized for the math and science classroom. The second limitation was the participants were all from Southeastern Michigan and were clustered within a 20-mile radius. The close proximity of the schools was partially due to the stipulation of the teachers teaching at schools with high graduation rates but also was a coincidence as other schools meet the criteria across Southeastern Michigan.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study described the lived experiences of teachers creating a supportive classroom environment. In the future, a study capturing the lived experiences of African-American students in schools with high graduation rates would provide data on the student perspective. The comparison of how the students view the teachers' methods for encouraging motivation and

engagement would create a complete picture of the supportive classroom environment. A qualitative study would provide the student descriptions to compare to the teachers' descriptions in the current study. Another possible study would be a case study of a high school with high graduation rates for African-American students. The case study would provide a complete picture of how the school environment plays a role in motivating and engaging African-American students to pursue graduation. The case study would include all stakeholders including teachers, students, and administrators. In both potential studies, the researcher should consider using classroom observations as a part of the data collection. The current study did not use observations, but observations would have added useful data for the study.

### **Summary**

The current study sought to describe the lived experiences of teachers who have created supportive classroom environments for African-American students. The descriptions of the lived experiences of the teachers yielded three themes which were relationships, collaboration, and positive reinforcement. The participants use relationships to build a sense of belonging and engage the students with the content. Collaborative groups aid students in feeling competence and build community among peers. Positive reinforcement also aids students' sense of competence and also helps students stay engaged.

The study supports the findings of previous research while providing new descriptions of how teachers build the three components of intrinsic motivation. The teachers understand the importance of meeting students' needs for belonging, competence, and autonomy and do so through the use of relationships, collaboration, and positive feedback. However, teachers in the current study do not focus on choice to support autonomy but use independence, competence and belonging to create autonomy support. This study provides teachers, administrators, and teacher

education programs with data to use to create a supportive classroom environment. Although previous studies indicated the importance for students to have a sense of belonging, competence, and autonomy, this study provides practical ways teachers are supporting the components of intrinsic motivation each day in the classroom. Also, empirically this study indicates that choice may not be as important to create autonomy. Teachers may be able to create autonomy support through relationships and student-centered collaborative groups.

## REFERENCES

- Banks, J. (2016). *An exploration of the experiences of black high school students in the mathematics classroom: A qualitative study*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest (10242473).
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov>
- Bottiani, J. H., Bradshaw, C. P., & Mendelson, T. (2016). Inequality in Black and White high school students' perceptions of school support: An examination of race in context. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 45*, 1176–1191.
- Burns, E. C., Martin, A. J., & Collie, R. J. (2019). Examining the yields of growth feedback from science teachers and students' intrinsic valuing of science: Implications for student- and school-level science achievement. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 56*(8), 1060-1082. doi:10.1002/tea.21546
- Callaway, R. F. (2017). A correlational study of teacher efficacy and culturally responsive teaching techniques in a southeastern urban school district. *Journal of Organizational and Educational Leadership, 2*(2), 1-27.
- Cham, H., Hughes, J. N., West, S. G., & Im, M. H. (2014). Assessment of adolescents' motivation for educational attainment. *Psychological Assessment, 26*(2), 642-659. doi:10.1037/a0036213
- Chapman, T. K. (2014). Is integration a dream deferred? students of color in majority white suburban schools. *The Journal of Negro Education, 83*(3), 311-326. doi:10.7709/jnegroeducation.83.3.0311

- Cheon, S. H., & Reeve, J. (2015). A classroom-based intervention to help teachers decrease students' amotivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 40*, 99-111.  
doi:10.1016/j.cedpsych.2014.06.004
- Chou, V. & Tumminia, A. (2017). Self-determination theory. In S. Rogelberg (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of industrial and organizational psychology, 2nd edition* (pp. 1399-1401). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). The flat earth and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future. *Educational Researcher, 36*(6), 318.
- Davis, R. J., & Palmer, R. T. (2010). The role of postsecondary remediation for African American students: A review of research. *The Journal of Negro Education, 79*(4), 503-520.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1980). Self-determination theory: When mind mediates behavior. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior, 1*(1), 33-43.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Self-determination theory: A macro theory of human motivation, development, and health. *Canadian Psychology, 49*(3), 182-185.  
doi:10.1037/a0012801
- Deci, E. L., Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., & Ryan, R. M. (1991). Motivation and education: The self-determination perspective. *Educational Psychologist, 26*(3-4), 325-346.  
doi:10.1080/00461520.1991.9653137

- Diamond, J. B. (2006). Still separate and unequal: Examining race, opportunity, and school achievement in "integrated" suburbs. *The Journal of Negro Education, 75*(3), 495-505.
- Diemer, M. A., Marchand, A. D., Mckellar, S. E., & Malanchuk, O. (2016). Promotive and corrosive factors in African American students' math beliefs and achievement. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 45*(6), 1208-1225. doi:10.1007/s10964-016-0439-9
- Dotterer, A. M., & Lowe, K. (2015). Perceived discrimination, parenting, and academic adjustment among racial/ethnic minority adolescents. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 41*, 71-77. doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2015.08.003
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1935). The Courts and the Negro separate school. *The Journal of Negro Education, 4*, 328-335.
- Fall, A., & Roberts, G. (2012). High school dropouts: Interactions between social context, self-perceptions, school engagement, and student dropout. *Journal of Adolescence, 35*(4), 787-798. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.11.004
- Fan, W., & Wolters, C. A. (2014). School motivation and high school dropout: The mediating role of educational expectation. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 84*(1), 22-39. doi:10.1111/bjep.12002
- Field, S. L., & Hoffman, A. S. (2012). Fostering self-determination through building productive relationships in the classroom. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 48*(1), 6-14. doi:10.1177/1053451212443150
- Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research, 59*(2), 117-142. doi:10.2307/1170412

- Finn, J. D., & Zimmer, K. S. (2012). Student engagement: What is it? Why does it matter? In S. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.) *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 97-131). New York, NY: Springer.
- Flores, A. (2007). Examining disparities in mathematics education: Achievement gap or opportunity gap? *The High School Journal*, *91*(1), 29-42. doi:10.1353/hsj.2007.0022
- Freeman, J., & Simonsen, B. (2015). Examining the impact of policy and practice interventions on high school dropout and school completion rates: A systematic review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, *85*(2), 205-248.  
doi:10.3102/0034654314554431
- Froiland, J. M., Worrell F. C. (2016). Intrinsic motivation, learning goals, engagement, and achievement in a diverse high school. *Psychology in the Schools*, *53*(3), 321-336.  
doi:10.1002/pits.21901
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers college press.
- Gordon, M. S., & Cui, M. (2018). The intersection of race and community poverty and its effects on adolescents' academic achievement. *Youth & Society*, *50*(7), 947-965.  
doi:10.1177/0044118X16646590
- Guay, F., Ratelle, C. F., & Chanal, J. (2008). Optimal learning in optimal contexts: The role of self-determination in education. *Canadian Psychology*, *49*(3), 233-240.  
doi:10.1037/a0012758
- Guay, F., Ratelle, C. F., Roy, A., & Litalien, D. (2010). Academic self-concept, autonomous academic motivation, and academic achievement: Mediating and additive effects. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *20*(6), 644-653. doi:10.1016/j.lindif.2010.08.001

- Horsford, S. D. (2011). Vestiges of desegregation: Superintendent perspectives on educational inequality and (dis)integration in the Post–Civil rights era. *Urban Education, 46*(1), 34-54. doi:10.1177/0042085910391596
- Howard, T. C., & Milner, H. R. (2014). Teacher preparation for urban schools. In H. R. Milner & K. Lomotey (Eds.), *Handbook of urban education* (pp. 199-216). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Howard, T. C. (2015). *Why race and culture matter in schools: Closing the achievement gap in America's classrooms*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Husserl, E. (1913). *Logical Investigations*. London: Routledge.
- Jang, H., Kim, E. J., & Reeve, J. (2016). Why students become more engaged or more disengaged during the semester: A self-determination theory dual-process model. *Learning and Instruction, 43*, 27-38. doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2016.01.002
- Jenkins-Guarnieri, M. A., Vaughan, A. L., & Wright, S. L. (2015). Development of a self-determination measure for college students: Validity evidence for the basic needs satisfaction at college scale. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development, 48*(4), 266-284. doi:10.1177/0748175615578737
- Joyner, R. L., Glatthorn, A. A., & Rouse, W. A. (2018). *Writing the winning thesis or dissertation: A step-by-step guide* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Juergensen, M. B. (2015). African American educators' ideas and practices for increasing high school graduation rates, 1920-1940. *The High School Journal, 99*(1), 46-65. doi:10.1353/hsj.2015.0017
- Kim, K. (2015). Occupational constraints and opportunities faced by school dropouts. *Education and Urban Society, 47*(4), 391-411. doi:10.1177/0013124513497505

- Konold, T., Cornell, D., Shukla, K., & Huang, F. (2017). Racial/Ethnic differences in perceptions of school climate and its association with student engagement and peer aggression. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *46*(6), 1289-1303. doi:10.1007/s10964-016-0576-1
- Kotok, S. (2017). Unfulfilled potential: High-achieving minority students and the high school achievement gap in math. *The High School Journal*, *100*(3), 183-202. doi:10.1353/hsj.2017.0007
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1997). It doesn't add up: African American students' mathematics achievement. *Journal for research in Mathematics Education*, *28*, 697-708.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Fighting for our lives: Preparing teachers to teach African American students. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *51*(3), 206-214. doi:10.1177/0022487100051003008
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, *35*(7), 3-12. doi:10.3102/0013189X035007003
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, *97*(1), 47-68.
- Lambeth, D. T., & Smith, A. M. (2016). Pre-service teachers' perceptions of culturally responsive teacher preparation. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *85*(1), 46-58. doi:10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.1.0046
- Levine, M., & Levine, A. G. (2014). Coming from behind: A historical perspective on black education and attainment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *84*(5), 447-454. doi:10.1037/h0099861

- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Lincoln Y. S (2004). Trustworthiness criteria. In Lewis-Beck, M. S., Bryman, A., & Futing Liao, T. (Eds.). *The SAGE encyclopedia of social science research methods* (p. 1145). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Mahatmya, D., Lohman, B. J., Brown, E. L., & Conway-Turner, J. (2016). The role of race and teachers' cultural awareness in predicting low-income, black and Hispanic students' perceptions of educational attainment. *Social Psychology of Education, 19*(2), 427-449. doi:10.1007/s11218-016-9334-1
- McKay, M. M., Atkins, M. S., Hawkins, T., Brown, C., & Lynn, C. J. (2003). Inner-city African American parental involvement in children's schooling: Racial socialization and social support from the parent community. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 32*(1), 107-114. doi:10.1023/A:1025655109283
- Michigan School Data, (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.mischooldata.org/Default2.aspx>
- Milner, H. R. (2012). Beyond a test score: Explaining opportunity gaps in educational practice. *Journal of Black Studies, 43*(6), 693-718. doi:10.1177/0021934712442539
- Morris, J. (2008). Research, ideology, and the brown decision: Counter-narratives to the historical and contemporary representation of black schooling. *Teachers College Record, 110*(4), 713.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Newton, V. A., & Sandoval, J. S. O. (2015). Educational expectations among African American suburban low to moderate income public high school students. *Journal of African American Studies, 19*(2), 135-156. doi:10.1007/s12111-015-9296-y
- Nunn, L. M. (2011). Classrooms as racialized spaces: Dynamics of collaboration, tension, and student attitudes in urban and suburban high schools. *Urban Education, 46*(6), 1226-1255. doi:10.1177/0042085911413146
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), (2018). Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_coi.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp)
- Pan, J., Zaff, J. F., & Donlan, A. E. (2017). Social support and academic engagement among reconnected youth: Adverse life experiences as a moderator. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 27*(4), 890-906. doi:10.1111/jora.12322
- Patall, E. A., Vasquez, A. C., Steingut, R. R., Trimble, S. S., & Pituch, K. A. (2016). Daily interest, engagement, and autonomy support in the high school science classroom. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 46*, 180-194. doi:10.1016/j.cedpsych.2016.06.002
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Peguero, A. A., Ovink, S. M., & Li, Y. L. (2016). Social bonding to school and educational inequality: Race/Ethnicity, dropping out, and the significance of place. *Sociological Perspectives, 59*(2), 317-344. doi:10.1177/0731121415586479
- Pendergast, L. L., Nickens, L., Pham, S., Miliareisis, S., & Canivez, G. L. (2018). Race and gender differences in teacher perceptions of student homework performance: A preliminary examination. *Contemporary School Psychology, 22*(3), 294-302. doi:10.1007/s40688-017-0162-x

- Pitre, C. C. (2014). Improving African American student outcomes: Understanding educational achievement and strategies to close opportunity gaps. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 38(4), 209-217.
- Polkinghorne, D. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience* (pp. 41- 60). New York, NY: Plenum. doi:10.1007/978-1-4615-6989-3\_3
- Pugh, P. M., & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2016). Influence of a school district's advancement via individual determination program on self-efficacy and other indicators of student achievement. *NASSP Bulletin*, 100(3), 141-158. doi:10.1177/0192636516679261
- Quin, D. (2017). Longitudinal and contextual associations between Teacher–Student relationships and student engagement: A systematic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(2), 345-387. doi:10.3102/0034654316669434
- Quin, D., Hemphill, S. A., & Heerde, J. A. (2017). Associations between teaching quality and secondary students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in school. *Social Psychology of Education*, 20(4), 807-829. doi:10.1007/s11218-017-9401-2
- Reeve, J. (2006). Teachers as facilitators: What Autonomy-Supportive teachers do and why their students benefit. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(3), 225-236. doi:10.1086/501484
- Reeve, J. (2012). A self-determination theory perspective on student engagement. In S. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.). *Handbook of research on student engagement*. New York, NY: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7

- Reeve, J., & Halusic, M. (2009). How K-12 teachers can put self-determination theory principles into practice. *Theory and Research in Education*, 7(2), 145-154.  
doi:10.1177/1477878509104319
- Reeve, J., Jang, H., Carrell, D., Jeon, S., & Barch, J. (2004). Enhancing students' engagement by increasing teachers' autonomy support. *Motivation and Emotion*, 28(2), 147-169.  
doi:10.1023/B:MOEM.0000032312.95499.6f
- Rendón, M. G. (2014). Drop out and “Disconnected” young adults: Examining the impact of neighborhood and school contexts. *The Urban Review*, 46(2), 169-196.  
doi:10.1007/s11256-013-0251-8
- Reschly, A. L., & Christenson, S. (2012). Jingle, jangle, and conceptual haziness: Evolution and future directions of the engagement construct. In S. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.) *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 3-19). New York, NY: Springer.
- Roorda, D. L., Jak, S., Zee, M., Oort, F. J., & Koomen, H. M. Y. (2017). Affective teacher-student relationships and students' engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic update and test of the mediating role of engagement. *School Psychology Review*, 46(3), 239-255.  
doi:10.17105/SPR-2017-0035.V46-3
- Rury, J. L., & Hill, S. (2011). *The African American struggle for secondary schooling: 1940-1980 ; closing the graduation gap*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Ruzek, E. A., Hafen, C. A., Allen, J. P., Gregory, A., Mikami, A. Y., & Pianta, R. C. (2016). How teacher emotional support motivates students: The mediating roles of perceived peer relatedness, autonomy support, and competence. *Learning and Instruction*, 42, 95-103.  
doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2016.01.004

- Sciarra, D. T., & Seirup, H. J. (2008). The multidimensionality of school engagement and math achievement among racial groups. *Professional School Counseling, 11*(4), 218-228. doi:10.5330/PSC.n.2010-11.218
- Scott, T., Jr. (2017). *Stay woke: The effects of culturally responsive teaching on African American male students*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest (10270619).
- Shernoff, D. J., Kelly, S., Tonks, S. M., Anderson, B., Cavanagh, R. F., Sinha, S., & Abdi, B. (2016). Student engagement as a function of environmental complexity in high school classrooms. *Learning and Instruction, 43*, 52-60. doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2015.12.003
- Shukla, K., Konold, T., & Cornell, D. (2016). Profiles of student perceptions of school climate: Relations with risk behaviors and academic outcomes. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 57*, 291–307. doi:10.1002/ajcp.12044.
- Siwatu, K. O. (2011). Preservice teachers' sense of preparedness and self-efficacy to teach in America's urban and suburban schools: Does context matter? *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(2), 357-365. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2010.09.004
- Skinner E.A., Pitzer J.R. (2012) Developmental dynamics of student engagement, coping, and everyday resilience. In: Christenson S., Reschly A., Wylie C. (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp. 21-46). Boston, MA: Springer
- Storer, H. L., Mienko, J. A., Chang, Y., Kang, J. Y., Miyawaki, C., & Schultz, K. (2012). Moving beyond dichotomies: How the intersection of race, class and place impacts high school graduation rates for African American students. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 39*(1), 17-44.

- Talbert, E., Hofkens, T., & Wang, M. (2019). Does student-centered instruction engage students differently? The moderation effect of student ethnicity. *The Journal of Educational Research, 112*(3), 327-341. doi:10.1080/00220671.2018.1519690
- Taylor, G., Jungert, T., Mageau, G. A., Schattke, K., Dedic, H., Rosenfield, S., . . . Lund University. (2014). A self-determination theory approach to predicting school achievement over time: The unique role of intrinsic motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 39*(4), 342-358. doi:10.1016/j.cedpsych.2014.08.002
- Thomas-Alexander, S., & Harper, B. E. (2017). Cleaning up the clinic: Examining mentor teachers' perceptions of urban classrooms and culturally responsive teaching. *Multicultural Learning and Teaching, 12*(1), 49-65. doi:10.1515/mlt-2015-0013
- Vega, D., James L Moore III, & Miranda, A. H. (2015). In their own words: Perceived barriers to achievement by African American and Latino high school students. *American Secondary Education, 43*(3), 36.
- Villarreal, M. D., & García, H. A. (2016). Self-Determination and goal aspirations: African American and Latino Males' perceptions of their persistence in community college basic and transfer-level writing courses. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 40*(10), 838-853. doi:10.1080/10668926.2015.1125314
- Voight, A., Hanson, T., O'Malley, M., & Adekanye, L. (2015). The racial school climate gap: Within-school disparities in students' experiences of safety, support, and connectedness. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 56*(3), 252-267. doi:10.1007/s10464-015-9751-x

- Vollet, J. W., Kindermann, T. A., & Skinner, E. A. (2017). In peer matters, teachers matter: Peer group influences on students' engagement depend on teacher involvement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 109*(5), 635-652. doi:10.1037/edu0000172
- Waddell, J. (2013). Communities as critical partners in teacher education: The impact of community immersion on teacher candidates' understanding of self and teaching in urban schools. *Current Issues in Education, 16*(2), 1-15.
- Wallace, T. L., & Sung, H. C. (2017). Student perceptions of autonomy-supportive instructional interactions in the middle grades. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 85*(3), 425-449. doi:10.1080/00220973.2016.1182885
- Wang, M., & Eccles, J. S. (2013). School context, achievement motivation, and academic engagement: A longitudinal study of school engagement using a multidimensional perspective. *Learning and Instruction, 28*, 12-23. doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2013.04.002
- Wang, M. T., & Fredericks, J. (2014). The reciprocal links between school engagement, youth problem behaviors, and school dropout during adolescence. *Child Development, 85*, 722-737. doi:10.1111/cdev. 12138
- Wang, M., & Huguley, J. P. (2012). Parental racial socialization as a moderator of the effects of racial discrimination on educational success among African American adolescents. *Child Development, 83*(5), 1716-1731. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01808.x
- Warren-Grice, A. (2017). Advocacy for equity: Extending culturally relevant pedagogy in predominantly white suburban schools. *Teachers College Record, 119*(1), 1.
- Wlodkowski, R. J., & Ginsberg, M. B. (1995). A framework for culturally responsive teaching. *Educational Leadership, 53*(1), 17-21.

Young, A., Johnson, G., Hawthorne, M., & Pugh, J. (2011). Cultural predictors of academic motivation and achievement: A self-deterministic approach. *College Student Journal, 45*(1), 151-164.

Zaff, J. F., Donlan, A., Gunning, A., Anderson, S. E., McDermott, E., & Sedaca, M. (2017). Factors that promote high school graduation: A review of the literature. *Educational Psychology Review, 29*(3), 447-476. doi:10.1007/s10648-016-9363-5

**APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 19, 2019

Tressa Matthews

IRB Approval 3919.091919: A Phenomenological Study That Examines the Experiences of High School Teachers Who Build Supportive Classroom Environments That Encourage African-American Students to Graduate

Dear Tressa Matthews,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

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

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

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

Sincerely,

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

**APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER**

Dear Teacher:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to explore perceptions of teachers creating supportive classroom environments, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older and are willing to participate you will be asked to complete an online survey, participate in an interview session to answer questions related to creating a supportive classroom environment, participate in a focus group discussion, and complete three journal prompts to reflect on your practices in the classroom. It should take approximately three hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Your participation will be completely confidential, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

If you would like to participate, please complete the screening survey. If you have any questions, please call 248-342-8448 or email at [tmatthews17@liberty.edu](mailto:tmatthews17@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

Tressa Matthews  
Doctoral Student

### APPENDIX C: SCREENING SURVEY

The purpose of this study is to identify teachers who meet the criteria for the study. Information about your gender and ethnicity are used to ensure diversity among the teachers invited to participate in the study.

1. State your name.
2. Provide an email address
3. State the name of the school where you teach.
4. State the city and state where the school is located.
5. How many years have you been teaching?
6. What grade(s) do you primarily teach?
7. State your gender.
8. State your race or ethnicity.

**APPENDIX D: AFTER SURVEY EMAILS**

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for taking the time to fill out the survey to participate in the study. This study is looking for teachers with three or more years of experience and who teach at schools with certain levels of diversity. Also, I want to ensure that there is diversity among the teachers selected for the study. Unfortunately, I will be unable to invite you to participate. I appreciate you taking the time to respond to the survey.

Sincerely,

Tressa Matthews

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for taking the time to fill out the survey to participate in the study. Based on your answers to the screening survey, you meet the criteria to participate in the study. If you are willing to participate, please review and sign the informed consent that is included with this letter. Also, please let me know your availability for the interview. I will collect your signed informed consent at the first interview. Thank you again for your time.

Sincerely,

Tressa Matthews

## APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORM

The Experience of Teachers Building Supportive Classroom Environments that Encourages  
African-American Students to Graduate

Tressa Matthews  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study about your perceptions and experiences with building a supportive classroom environment the encourage African-American students to graduate. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a high school teacher with three or more years of experience and you mentioned the importance of classroom environment in the demographics survey. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Tressa Matthews, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of high school teachers creating supportive classroom environments that encourage African-American students to graduate, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a recorded interview related to your experience creating a supportive classroom environment. The interview should last 45-60 minutes.
2. Complete three journal prompts over the course of three weeks that relate to your experiences creating a supportive environment for African-American students. Each journal should take 20-30 minutes to complete.
3. Participate in a recorded focus group to discuss the same experiences with other teachers. The focus group discussion should last 45-60 minutes.
4. After the interview and focus group, the discussions will be transcribed. When the transcription is ready it will be given to you to review for accuracy. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and make any corrections before the transcript is used in the study. Reviewing the transcript may take 15 minutes.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect any direct benefits from participating in this study. The results from the study may provide clarity on understanding teacher perceptions and experiences related to creating a supportive classroom environment to promote graduation for African-American students. Also, the study may provide information for educators, school administrators, and educational leaders about how to ensure positive experience in the classroom for African-American students.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Data will be stored on a password locked computer or in a locked cabinet and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and written data will be shredded. I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Tressa Matthews. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at (248) 342-8448 or [tmatthews17@liberty.edu](mailto:tmatthews17@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Sharon Michael-Chadwell, at [sdmichaelchadwell@liberty.edu](mailto:sdmichaelchadwell@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

## APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Standardized Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself and educational background
2. Describe your professional timeline including schools and demographics of schools where you have worked.
3. Describe how your professional timeline assisted in the development of your supportive classroom environment.
4. Describe your experience with students feeling capable in the classroom.
5. Describe your experience with helping students persevere in the classroom.
6. Describe your experience with giving students choices in the classroom.
7. Describe your experience with students taking ownership in the classroom.
8. Describe your experience with helping students feel connected to you.
9. Describe your experience with helping students feel connected to their peers.
10. Describe your experience with engaging all students in learning in the classroom.
11. Describe your experience with engaging students to enjoy your content area.

**APPENDIX G: JOURNAL PROMPTS**

Instructions: For the next three weeks, you will receive a journal prompt each Friday by email to reflect on your daily practice in building a supportive classroom. Please spend 10 to 15 minutes reflecting over the previous week before responding. Write a paragraph describing your experiences over the course of the week.

1. Thinking about the past week, describe a time when you intentionally focused on helping an African-American student feel competent to be successful in your classroom. Describe your perceptions on how your efforts helped the student.
2. Thinking about the past week, describe a time when you intentionally focused on helping an African-American student have a sense of independence and choice in the classroom. Describe your perceptions on how your efforts helped the student.
3. Thinking about the past week, describe a time when you intentionally focused on helping an African-American student feel a sense of belonging or community in the classroom. Describe your perceptions on how your efforts helped the student.

## **APPENDIX H: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

1. How do you adapt motivation strategies based on the classroom dynamics?
2. How do you adapt engagement strategies based on the classroom dynamics?
3. How do you adapt your classroom environment practices when you faced with a student who refuses to engage?
4. What are your experiences with creating a supportive classroom environment for unmotivated students?
5. How do you incorporate the culture of the students in the classroom into creating a supportive classroom environment?

### APPENDIX I: INVARIANT HORIZONS

Sub-themes and Invariant Horizons	Themes
Intentionally engage student in conversations	Teacher-Student Relationships
Greet them at the door	
Ask questions and remember the answers	
Have one on one conversations	
Relationships with students will encourage them to learn	
Students will work when they know you care	
Use relationship to connect to student interest	
Understand why a student disengages	
Relationships engages the unengaged	
Know when students need a break	
Know the impact of life outside of school	
Allow for conversations about lack of work	
Collaborations creates student-centered learning	
Students own learning and are accountable	
Students listen and learn from each other	
Give opportunities to express themselves	
Build student competence with groups	
Share findings as a team	
Rely on each other for learning support	
Students notice others need time to learn	Positive Reinforcement
High expectations with support	
Use small chunks for tough content	
Use encouraging words	
Find the positive in student work	
Regular informal feedback	
Model the behavior you desire	
Enthusiasm for subject	
Lighten mood with humor and fun	
Give chances to feel comfortable with mistakes	

### APPENDIX J: RESEARCHER JOURNAL

Date	Journal Entry
5/15/19	I am aware that I believe teachers possess the power to encourage or discourage learning in the classroom. I believe when teachers believe in students then students believe in themselves. As an African-American, growing up in southeastern Michigan, I experienced times when I was ignored and treated as unintelligent by teachers before I turned in any work. Upon transferring to a suburban school in middle school, I was placed in a lower reading and math group even though my standardized test scores demonstrated I was above average in every subject. However, I also had teachers who recognized my potential and encouraged me to move into honors level classes. Those teachers changed the trajectory of my life. I would have graduated from high school and attended college, but I would not have graduated with honors and attended the one of the best colleges in the area. I worked hard and accomplished much because of the support of several teachers. Teachers make a difference.
9/23	I have the pilot study today. I am excited and nervous to start the process. I am passionate about motivation and engagement but I desire to keep my opinions here to prevent bias
10/2	I interviewed my first participant today. It went well. I resonated with many of the things that Rose said and I saw the importance of sticking to the questions to prevent adding myself into the study.
10/9	Two interviews today and both were interesting. There were some common things said but I refrained from speaking on them. The diverse suburban school seems to have a different vibe, but we will see. I resonate with all of the participants. Creating a supportive environment takes time and intentionality.
10/16	Two interviews today. The first was amazing as I was able to sit in the participants classroom. I wish I had that opportunity with every participant because it was cool to see the classroom environment. The participant said many things I have never tried in my classroom. The second interview was cut short as the participant had an emergency. I hope we can reschedule.
10/24	Two interviews today. I am excited one was in the classroom again. It was a math classroom and it looked engaging. The teacher was passionate about collaboration. I did not think all the participants would talk about collaboration but many have mentioned it.
10/26	Long interview today. The anecdotes from the participant were great. The participant had lots of experiences. It made me reflect on my teaching. How much do I focus on motivating students? Right now I am so busy with the study, I may not be as focused as I should be. I will spend the rest of the weekend reflecting on students I need to interact with more.

10/28	Another cancellation at the last minute, but I had a long time to sit and read transcripts. I am amazed at the heart that teachers put into the classroom. I wonder if all of the teachers do the same. Are these teachers special? What would kids say?
10/30	Interviewing young teachers is different. They have not yet found there groove yet they know what is important. I love the passion of a newer teacher. I pray they never lose the fire.
11/1	My job is to listen. The patterns are emerging. I amazed at how dedicated each of these teacher are to the students. The schools are successful because of the quality fo the teachers.
11/4	Preparing for my focus groups. I have transcribed all the interviews. I hope to give participants to have a good discussions.

**APPENDIX K: AUDIT TRAIL**

Date:	Procedure:
9/23/19	Conducted pilot study
10/1/19	Began interviews
11/7/19	Completed interviews
11/9/19	Focus Group 1
11/13/19	Focus Group 2