A CASE STUDY EXAMINING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS AND STUDENT MOTIVATION IN THE UPPER ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

by

Amanda B. King

Liberty University

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

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APPROVED BY:

James Swezey, Ed. D., Committee Chair

Amanda Savage, Ed. D., Committee Member
ABSTRACT
The purpose of this multiple case study was to develop an in-depth understanding of how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation within the upper elementary, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade, classroom for students at Small Rural Elementary School (SRES; pseudonym) in southeastern Pennsylvania. The theory guiding this study is Maslow’s hierarchy of need as it explains the effects human needs have on motivation, confirming the significance of students having their basic needs met in the classroom by their teacher in order to be motivated to achieve greater outcomes in the classroom. The study was guided by a central research question: how are student-teacher relationships connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom? The multiple case study utilized three data collection methods: surveys, interviews, and a focus group. Data were then coded to find common themes on how student-teacher relationships are created through the meeting of physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs of students and examine the impact these relationships have on student motivation in the upper elementary classroom at SRES. The findings of this research suggested SRES upper elementary teachers are able to build authentic relationships with their students through simple acts in the classroom that meet the student physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs, and in turn students are more motivated within the classrooms of teachers they have genuine relationships with, where trust has become the foundation.

Keywords: student-teacher relationship, student motivation, physiological needs, unmet needs, authentic actions
Dedication

To Dustin, Daniel, Peyton, Eli, Rebekah, and Madalyn – your constant love, support, and silliness bring me joy every day and inspire me to be who God has called me to be. “In the same way let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven,” Matthew 5:16. Keep sharing God’s love and shining your light so others will see and glorify Him.
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Small Rural Elementary School (SRES)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Upper elementary teachers face many challenges every day within their classrooms, school systems, and communities that gravely impact their students, as well as their ability to educate those students (Dudaite, 2016). One such challenge that continues to increase for upper elementary teachers is low student motivation in the classroom which impacts student engagement, achievement, and behavior (Marshik et al., 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study will be to develop an in-depth understanding of how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation within the upper elementary classroom. The problem that will lead this research is the lack of studies of student-teacher relationships and how they are connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom. The focus audience for this study will be educators and administrators of upper elementary classrooms and school systems that want to evaluate how student motivation is impacted by student-teacher relationships in order to adjust their current classroom climate and school cultures. Maslow’s hierarchy of need theory provided the theoretical framework for this study.

This chapter provides a background of literature and how it relates to my current study. The situation to self will address my motivation for analyzing the connectedness between student-teacher relationships and student motivation in the classroom. The problem and purpose statements will be presented along with significance of the current study, research questions, and definitions.

Background

Student motivation continues to drop within the classroom. Studies have revealed when student motivation decreases in the classroom, student engagement also declines significantly,
which often lead to negative impacts on students’ ability to achieve in the classroom (Hernandez et al., 2017). Marshik et al. (2017) suggested that student motivation is essential for continued student engagement in all classrooms, which leads to increased student achievement, the building of life-long learners, and increased resiliency among students when faced with challenges.

Educators have begun to question how to build student motivation within their individual classrooms. Several factors have been raised and considered, however one major area where teachers can foster increased student motivation within their own classrooms is student-teacher relationships (Dykstra Steinbrenner & Watson, 2015). Current research has determined that the student-teacher relationships play a large role on how behaviors, such as motivation, manifest within the classroom (Zee & Roorda, 2018). If student-teacher relationships have the ability to increase or decrease student motivation in the classroom, teachers need to focus their current classroom practices on determining what they are or are not doing in regard to these relationships.

In addition to student-teacher relationships, student motivation is directly related to school climate and a student’s feeling of belongingness (Angus & Hughes, 2017). Angus and Hughes (2017) determined mentors, such as classroom teachers, made a lasting impact on their mentees and current students, and that in order for students to positively add to school climate they need to feel accepted and important. Therefore, student-teacher relations are linked to school climate, having the ability to not only affect the climate within a specific classroom, but within an entire school system. In order to positively impact students, schools need to establish a school climate where students feel safe, are able to ask for help, and believe they can reach their goals (Riekie et al., 2017). By evaluating the current school climate and culture, a school system has the ability to focus in on meaningful practices conducted by teachers and administrators that
positively affect students, teachers, and the entire school system, while removing other practices
that detract from students’ and teachers’ ability to truly connect within the classroom and
negatively impact the school climate, and therefore affecting the entire school system.

Historical

Education in the United States was once only available to children who lived in the right
place, had enough money, or were considered to be from an acceptable family (Schunk, 2016).
Even though the federal government tried to mandate compulsory education in the 1870s and
1880s, their efforts were unsuccessful. It wasn’t until 1917 when all states made education
available to all children throughout the United States (Cusick, 2014). With this change came
increased expectations for schools and teachers across the country (Rauscher, 2015). Schools
were established to educate all students, while teachers were present to teach only the necessary
curriculum students needed to become successful members of society. Students were believed to
come to school ready to learn, achieve, and grow (Rauscher, 2015). Student-teacher
relationships were not considered to be necessary as part of the learning process until recently,
and therefore were not focused on by teachers or school systems (Froiland et al., 2019).

Social

Student motivation and engagement in the classroom have drastic impacts on student
behavior and ability to assimilate in social school settings (Burns & Botzakis, 2016). Studies
have revealed a reciprocal association between need satisfaction and social relationships in
school climates, specifically with student-teacher relationships (Back et al., 2016). Students
were able to build off of positive relationships with their teachers within the classroom so that
they were better equipped to interact with their peers, school environment, and classroom
teachers (Crum et al., 2017). Research demonstrates that positive student-teacher relationships
have the ability to prevent a decline in student behavior and enhance student social awareness (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2017).

Theoretical

Teachers and peers often judge low-achieving students solely based on their appearance, hygiene, and unpreparedness for school. However, these students often come to school looking for someone to help them meet their basic needs because these needs are not being met at home (Crawford et al., 2017). Abraham Maslow studied the effects human needs had on motivation, and through his research he developed the hierarchy of need theory which confirmed the necessity of having basic needs met in order for one to be motivated and able to achieve greater outcomes (Maslow, 1954). Several studies have been conducted on how to improve student achievement through the meeting of basic needs (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2017; Smith et al., 2018). The low-achieving students in these studies showed growth when they felt cared for and nurtured. Through deeper understanding of how basic needs can affect student motivation and academic achievement educators, administrators, and policymakers can provide assistance for students and parents, as well as create a school environment that supports all students and their needs.

Situation to Self

The motivation for this case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how this upper elementary teacher is able to identify what characteristics make up a positive student-teacher relationship that significantly impacts students and their motivation in the classroom. I currently serve as a regular education fifth grade teacher and have served as a special education teacher in both fifth and sixth grade. I have experienced and have had success building positive student-teacher relationships; however, I am not an expert in this area. I would like to compare
my personal experience with the experience of other teachers for the purpose of helping other teachers and administrators better understand the importance of student-teacher relationships and how to build these relationships within the upper elementary school classroom.

I will rely on ontological assumptions, realism and materialism, for this study collecting multiple forms of evidence expecting themes to emerge during analysis. The actual words and perspectives of elementary teachers and other stakeholders in this case will be used to help assemble a singular view of what allows elementary teachers to effectively build student-teacher relationships that positively impact student motivation in the upper elementary classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The paradigm that will guide this study will be social constructivism, the belief that sociology and communication theory help construct the joint understandings of the world that form the foundation for shared assumptions about reality. I will examine perceptions and experiences of teacher and other stakeholders in this case study using broad questions to gain a deeper understanding of their beliefs and reactions to student-teacher relationships, student motivation in the upper elementary classroom, and current school climate and culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Problem Statement**

Student motivation continues to drop, which significantly affects student engagement within the classroom and overall student achievement level (Hernandez et al., 2017). Student motivation is essential for continued engagement in all classrooms which leads to student achievement, the build of life-long learners, and resiliency among students when faced with challenges (Marshik et al., 2017). The problem is student motivation continues to decline in the upper elementary classroom and teachers are trying to determine what they can do within their own classroom to reduce the decline of student motivation (Ing et al., 2015). However, more and
more students, mostly from the low socio-economic subgroup, are entering their classrooms with low motivation and teachers are struggling to raise student motivational levels (Crum et al., 2017). Current research has determined that the student-teacher relationship played a large role on how these behaviors manifested within the classroom (Zee & Roorda, 2018); however, this research does not establish what needs to take place in order to create these positive student-teacher relationships. Few studies provide in-depth understanding of the context for positive student-teaching relationships and what steps need to be taken in order to ensure these are being built in school systems throughout the country (Crawford et al., 2017; Harpin et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2015).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study will be to develop an in-depth understanding of how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation within the upper elementary classroom for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students at a small, rural school in southeastern Pennsylvania. A student-teacher relationship will be generally defined as a relationship between a teacher and their students where the teacher is able to meet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs which creates an encouraging connection between the student and their teacher that impacts student motivation in a positive manner (Zee & Roorda, 2018). The theory guiding this study is Maslow’s hierarchy of need; lower-order needs have to be satisfied adequately before higher-order needs can influence behavior (Maslow, 1954). Studies have been conducted on how to improve student achievement through the meeting of basic needs. The low-achieving students in these studies showed growth when they felt cared for and nurtured (Dudaite, 2016). If a positive student-teacher relationship is able to produce more motivation among students, teachers will be encouraged to truly consider their
interactions with their students beyond academics, as well as how teachers and school systems can meet the physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs of the students.

**Significance of the Study**

The empirical significance of this study will expand research about both student physiological needs and motivational levels and how both are tied to student-teaching relationships (Froiland et al., 2019). Karakus (2017) demonstrated that a negative school climate leads to a negative student perception, greatly affecting a student’s academic ability and the student’s sense of community and belongingness. The theoretical significance of this study will demonstrate the necessity of having unmet physiological needs met, in conjunction with discerning factors that increase student motivation in the classroom (Dudaite, 2016). Low achieving students can make tremendous gains when they feel connected to their school and peers, and feel cared for by their teachers, in addition to believing they can achieve (Veiskarami et al., 2017). The practical significance of this study will embolden the school system being studied, as well as other school systems, to begin to consider how they can improve student-teacher relationships and school climate as a whole in order to improve upon student motivation in the classroom (Joshi & Acharya, 2013). Classroom management, staff relations, and school climate are strongly tied to student achievement, therefore Back et al. (2016) suggested for school districts to provide professional development and resources to allow teachers to improve their practices within the classroom and the school as a whole.

**Research Questions**

The following central question and sub-questions were used to guide the study to better understand the connection between student-teacher relationships and student motivation in the upper elementary classroom:
Central Question

How are student-teacher relationships connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom? The majority of research surrounding student-teacher relationships focuses on their importance in the primary grades, as well as the high school years, but few studies have been conducted on the upper elementary grades (Hernandez et al., 2017). The purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth understanding of how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation within the upper elementary classroom for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students.

Guiding Questions

Guiding Question 1

What affect does unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs have on students in the classroom? Hanscombe et al. (2011) demonstrated that if a family unit is unable to meet basic needs of their children, their children will suffer academically in the classroom. This question is relevant because it will help determine how unmet basic needs not only affect students academically, but also behaviorally and emotionally, within the classroom.

Guiding Question 2

How are teachers meeting the unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs of their students? Hanscombe et al. (2011) reported basic needs must be met for students to make gains in the classroom. This question will help determine if teachers are able to address unmet needs of student in their classroom, in addition to stating what specifically teachers are doing to meet these needs.

Guiding Question 3

How do teachers build relationships with their students in the classroom? The rationale
for this question is to determine what teachers do to build relationships with their students.

Student-teacher relationships have been linked to student motivation however few studies have been conducted to determine how teachers build relationships with their students (Froiland et al., 2019). This question will help reveal what effective methods teachers implement in their classroom to build relationships that matter to their students.

**Definitions**

1. *Need* - as basic things required by all humans to survive and maintain life (Taormina & Gao, 2013) defined *need*.

2. *Maslow’s hierarchy of needs* - as a psychological theory that focuses on human motivation and how it corresponds with human needs being met (McLeod, 2016).

   For the purposes of the intended research, hierarchy of needs is structured as a pyramid thus demonstrating how basic needs are the foundation, while also validating how humans can progress up and down the pyramid based on life’s circumstances.

3. *Physiological needs* - the chemicals, nutrients, and environmental conditions humans need to live (Taormina & Gao, 2013).

4. *Safety-security needs* - an individual’s ability to have a peaceful life, given stability, where they are provided with protection from physical harm and financial ruin (Taormina & Gao, 2013).

5. *Belongingness needs* - personal relationships that create a sense of closeness, pleasant emotions, and intimate friendships where concerns for one another are shared. For the purposes of the intended research, belongingness needs incorporates how students perceive their home relationships, as well as their relationships at school among themselves, their peers and their teachers (Taormina & Gao, 2013).
6. **Student achievement** - a student’s ability to perform on or above grade level, meeting teacher expectations (Hanscombe et al., 2011).

7. **Motivation** - a person’s willingness to work hard, ability to reach their goals, and the drive to keep going (Joshi & Acharya, 2013).

**Summary**

This chapter provided the background for this qualitative case study. Upper elementary teachers are faced with the challenge of low student motivation in the classroom which impacts student engagement, achievement, and behavior (Marshik et al., 2017). The problem is student motivation continues to decline in the classroom and teachers are trying to determine how they can reduce the decline of student motivation (Ing et al., 2015). The purpose of this qualitative case study is to develop an in-depth understanding of how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation within the upper elementary classroom for fifth and sixth grade students at a small, rural school in southeastern Pennsylvania. The theory guiding this study is Maslow’s hierarchy of need as Maslow studied the effects human needs had on motivation, and through his research he developed the hierarchy of need theory which confirmed the significance of having basic needs, such as feeling safe and cared for, met in order to be motivated to achieve greater outcomes (Maslow, 1954). This study fills a gap in the literature because there is currently no focused research on the teachers’ perspective and methods used within the upper elementary classroom to build student-teacher relationships that positively impact student motivation in the classroom.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This literature review provides a theoretical understanding of student motivation and achievement in the classroom, as well as related literature on how positive and negative student-teacher relationships play a vital role on student motivation and achievement in the upper elementary classroom. Student motivation directly affects student achievement in the classroom (Crum et al., 2017). However, one must then consider what directly impacts student motivation. Recently, educators have begun to question how student motivation within their classrooms affects achievement, as well as the factors that impact whether or not a student is motivated throughout their academic experience (Moen et al., 2019). Current research has started to suggest student-teacher relationships have a significant impact on student achievement (Newcomer, 2018). Some believe that if a student has a positive relationship with their teacher they will be more willing to participate in class, therefore, improving their engagement level which directly affects their motivation and achievement within the classroom (Martin & Collie, 2019).

This study aims to evaluate the connections between student-teacher relationships and student motivation within the upper elementary classroom. The purpose of this literature review is to provide a comprehensive analysis of current research on positive and negative student-teacher relationships, as well as student motivation within the classroom. First, the theoretical framework will be discussed to ensure a rich understanding of what physiological factors are necessary for an individual to progress along Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of need in order to demonstrate motivation throughout their life. Additionally, the theoretical framework will address factors that contribute to the unmet physiological needs of today’s students. Second,
research on the importance of student engagement, motivation, and achievement within the classroom will be discussed and evaluated based on negative factors and positive factors. Third, parental rejection will be evaluated in order to determine how entering the school system with unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs can impact students within the classroom. Fourth, research on school climate and student-teacher relationships will be reviewed through the lens of negative factors and positive factors. Fifth, research focusing on characteristics and qualities of inspiring teachers and effects on student performance will be appraised. Finally, the effects of positive and negative student-teacher relationships on student sub-groups will be reviewed.

**Theoretical Framework**

Abraham Maslow (1954) studied human motivation in relation to human needs being met. He determined five levels of human needs and created a hierarchy of these needs, stating that in order for humans to be motivated and increase their motivation level they must have their basic needs met first in order to continue up the pyramid (Maslow, 1954). The foundational level of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is comprised of basic physiological needs every human must attain in order to proceed and succeed throughout their life. The basic physiological needs are: food, water, shelter, and rest (Maslow, 1954). The final level of the hierarchy of needs is self-actualization, which is capable of being attained by all humans if they have met all of their lower-order needs (Maslow, 1954). However, many individuals are unable to reach this level because they or their caregivers have failed to meet their lower-order needs and lack the motivation needed to keep continuing up the hierarchy of needs pyramid (McLeod, 2016). Additionally, the levels of hierarchy on which individuals are will waver due to unexpected life experiences (McLeod, 2016). Theorists and educators have taken Maslow’s work and applied it
to student motivation and academic achievement in the classroom (Schunk, 2016). Low-achieving students often come to school with their foundational level of physiological needs unmet (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). In order for academic achievement to rise and student motivation to increase, students’ physiological needs must be met either by their parents or the school system (McLeod, 2016).

Two of the basic physiological needs that must be met according to Maslow’s hierarchy of need is adequate food and water consumption. Food instability within American homes continues to increase and impact many families and children throughout the United States. In 2014, approximately 17.4 million households in the United States experienced food insecurity (Gundersen et al., 2015). Food insecurity affects parental stress and mental health. Gill et al. (2018) reported mothers of preschool-aged children were more likely to experience anxiety disorders as their food insecurity increased. As food insecurity and parental anxiety increased the emotional stability of the home decreased, which greatly affected the children of these homes both physically and mentally, often negatively impacting the parent-child relationships (Gill et al., 2018). Gill et al. (2018) stated early intervention through the assistance of food support is needed in order to prevent any long-term negative affects food insecurity has on these children’s well-being and state of mind. In order to perform in the classroom and properly engage within the school system, students need to exhibit a healthy mindset (Arguedas et al., 2016). A healthy mindset not only includes a positive mental state and overall well-being, but requires an emotional awareness that allows students to be more aware of their feelings, what affects their behaviors, and allows for self-regulation (Arguedas et al., 2016). When a student enters the classroom with a healthy mindset they are able to recognize their emotions, regulate their feelings, and participate in the classroom and lessons in a more meaningful and engaging manner.
(Arguedas et al., 2016). Therefore, schools need to address any food insecurities facing the families within their school system in order to meet both the physical and mental health needs of their students.

Another basic physiological need necessary for human development and continued motivation to progress up Maslow’s hierarchy of need is shelter. Children need a home to go to when the school day is done, however, more and more students within the United States are experiencing homelessness. According to the United States Department of Education 1.2 million students enrolled in the public school system are homeless (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2014). Sulkowski (2016) reported the rate of homeless children within the public school system continues to rise, placing significant barriers on these students which greatly affect their ability to progress throughout the school system. Students who are homeless are forced to move around a lot and lack dependability in their life. Additionally, homeless students are facing hunger, malnutrition, excessive stress, social and emotional health concerns, and social isolation (Howland et al., 2017). Students facing homelessness are more likely to underperform academically than their non-homeless peers and require additional learning support services through the means of a 504 education plan or an individualized education plan (Sulkowski, 2016).

Although students facing homelessness in the public school system are facing many academic challenges, reports indicate these students are showing signs of resilience in the classroom (Sulkowski, 2016). In order for schools to assist in this area Sullivan-Walker et al. (2017) determined that schools should contact community agencies who can assist families in need. School systems need to not only identify which of their students are facing homelessness, but continue to work with these students, their families, and community organizations in order to
help them find a stable living condition and receive additional support for both their mental and physical health. Krahn et al. (2018) reported 15% of homeless children’s mental health outcomes improved when their families worked with a case manager who helped them to find stable housing and mental health assistance often through a therapist. Through clear and continued communication between the school system, local organizations, and community agencies students facing homelessness will receive the resources needed to provide some stability in their life and begin to have their basic, physiological needs met. Housing instability creates significant barriers for students and needs to be addressed in order for students to continue to progress, grow, and succeed.

The final basic physiological need necessary for movement along Maslow’s hierarchy of need is rest. Children need to feel safe enough within their home environment so that they can truly rest. However, many of the children within the United States are unable to find rest within their home due to continued domestic violence. De Jong (2016) reported 15 million children in the United States live in families where domestic violence occurs and over half of these children experience or witness severe violence. Domestic violence not only poses a physical threat to these children, but also social, emotional, and behavioral concerns (De Jong, 2016). School age children who experience domestic violence are at higher risks for anxiety, depression, attention problems, aggression, withdrawal, bullying, and risk-taking behaviors (De Jong, 2016). De Jong (2016) revealed the trauma experienced by these children results in toxic stress which significantly alters their ability to perform within the school system and has life-long implications.

A child’s home environment greatly impacts the course of that child’s life. Orri et al. (2019) stated the quality and quantity of stimulation and support within the home is the main
predictor for the cognitive and emotional health of the children within that home. Children are impacted by the warmth, sensitivity, and responsivity of their parents, however, these parenting qualities are affected by finances, parental mental health, and parental preparedness (Orri et al., 2019). By providing support for families experiencing domestic violence, financial instability, and emotional health concerns, agencies and school systems can positively impact the lives of the children within these homes, often allowing them the rest they need in order to succeed.

Taormina and Gao (2013) studied the impact that family support had on student achievement and motivation in school. They discovered that a family’s ability to provide for their children’s basic needs, as well as emotional needs, played the strongest role on student academic achievement. The authors believed the family unit is the most influential factor on a student. However, this study, along with the study conducted by Hanscombe et al. (2011), demonstrated that if a family unit is unable to meet basic needs of their children, their children will suffer academically and affirms the notion that basic needs must be met for students to make gains in the classroom. Therefore, schools need to determine how they are going to assist any family who is unable to meet their children’s needs.

With more and more students entering the classroom with unmet physiological needs and lacking parent involvement, schools have begun to recognize the educational implications these challenges now present for all educators, administrators, and policymakers (Dudaite, 2016). Jeffrey et al. (2013) conducted a study of teacher-student caring relationships that focused on how teachers meet students’ physiological needs. The study revealed how meeting those needs created a positive relationship between teachers and students, which in turn positively affected student achievement in the classroom. Student-teacher relationships, especially in the elementary classroom, have been found to have a significant influence on students due to their
current state of development (Jeffrey et al., 2013). Positive relationships with teachers are able to create the foundation students need for a successful social and academic environment (Jeffrey et al., 2013). When a teacher meets the unmet physiological needs of a student through a positive student-teacher relationship they are enabling the student to progress along Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need continuum, thus allowing the student to increase their motivational level within the classroom because their basic needs are now met and no longer a current focus of the student.

Needs are tiered; layered so that the lower-order needs have to be sufficiently fulfilled before higher-order needs can influence a person’s behavior (Schunk, 2016). Studies have been conducted on how to improve student achievement through the meeting of basic needs (Garas-York, 2010; Noltemeyer et al., 2012). The low-achieving students in these studies showed little to no growth when they did not feel provided or cared for (Garas-York, 2010). Through deeper understanding of how basic needs can affect student motivation and academic achievement, educators, administrators, and policymakers can provide assistance for students and parents, as well as create a school environment that supports all students and their need (Noltemeyer et al., 2012).

Maslow (1954) demonstrated the necessity for basic needs to be met in order for one to progress on to higher needs and employ deeper motivation. He revealed the final level of the hierarchy of need as being self-actualization, which he believed was capable of being attained by all humans if they have met all of their lower-order needs. However, many individuals are unable to reach this level because they or their caregivers have failed to meet their lower-order needs and lack the motivation needed to keep continuing up the hierarchy of needs pyramid (McLeod, 2016). Everyone is able to increase their motivational level and move up the
hierarchy of needs, if their basic needs are met and life experiences do not affect their movement through the levels. As humans progress up the hierarchy of needs pyramid, motivation and achievement does increase. Thus, teachers are capable of meeting these basic level needs solely through positive, genuine student-teacher relationships (Lonn & Dantzler, 2017). Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need will be used as the guiding theory throughout this case study as it establishes the foundation that student-teacher relationships can significantly impact students’ ability to move along the hierarchy of need when those relationships meet the unmet physiological needs of the students, providing them with feelings of safety, security, and belongingness.

**Related Literature**

Researching the impact student motivation has on student achievement in the classroom, in addition to the factors that significantly affect student motivation, and the influence positive and negative student-teacher relationships have on student motivation allows educators a better understanding of what their students are experiencing at home, as well as in the classroom. In addition, understanding the connection student-teacher relationships have with student motivation allows teachers more insight into factors they can control in relation to their classroom climate, culture, and feelings of belongingness. In order to do a thorough job, an educator needs to review many sources and find research that best addresses current factors impacting students within the home and within the school system, focusing on experiences and relationships that contribute to student motivation. A lot is asked of students while they are at school. Students are expected to expand on their current understanding, attempt new tasks, take risks with their academics and relationships, all while maintain proper behavior and a healthy mindset. Therefore, unless students come to school prepared, having all of their basic
physiological needs met, as well as motivated to learn, they will be unable to achieve within the classroom.

**Student Engagement, Motivation, and Achievement**

Student engagement and motivation levels within the classroom are considered to be vital components for students’ success and achievement within the classroom (Dykstra Steinbrenner & Watson, 2015). However, student engagement, motivation, and achievement have been decreasing in the elementary school classroom over the last decade (Kilbourne et al. 2017). Dierendonck et al. (2019) revealed student engagement is multidimensional, nevertheless it is significantly affected by a student’s home environment, support received by family, peers, and teachers, and ability to set goals for oneself. Students who came from communities where students recognized the investment their family, school and community were putting into them, were more motivated and engaged in the classroom than their counterparts who were from communities that lacked involvement in the local schools and families (Dierendonck et al., 2019).

When evaluating student engagement, motivation, and achievement, research studies need to evaluate individuals and sub-groups, as well as entire communities. Belfi et al.’s (2016) study has demonstrated that not only does a student’s individual socio-economic status affect their achievement, motivation, and engagement levels within the classroom, but the community’s and school’s socio-economic status greatly impact their education as well. This study revealed that students had more positive achievement growth in high-socio economic status as compared to low-socio economic status and mixed-socio economic status schools (Belfi et al., 2016). There is a need for different approaches when working with low socio-economic students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). Students from low socio-economic backgrounds need not only
the best teachers, willing to employ the best teaching practices, but teachers who will be able to connect with their students in more meaningful ways (Back et al., 2016). Roofe (2018) demonstrated how student motivation and achievement levels can increase when students are instructed by a teacher who utilizes responsive teaching techniques. Responsive teaching curtails instruction based on where the students currently are within their academic work, understanding where they need to progress to, and what techniques and lessons are necessary in order to get the students to where they need to be. Additionally, Roofe (2018) stresses the need for teachers to recognize the unmet physical, academic, and emotional needs of their students and work with the school system to meet these needs. When these needs are met and best practices are used these students’ attitudes begin to change towards school and education (Callow & Orlando, 2015).

**Negative Factors**

Student engagement, motivation, and achievement are both positively and negatively affected by several factors (Ihtiyaroglu & Demirbolat, 2016). One factor that can significantly alter a child’s perspective and willingness to work is their ability to construct a purpose for engagement and employ self-regulation strategies throughout a task (Lichtinger & Kaplan, 2015). Lichtinger and Kaplan (2015) conducted a study that revealed that few to none of their student participants engaged in planning activities before they started on the larger task and never asked the teacher for help, thus leading to frustration and work refusal. Students often shut down before they even get started on a task within the classroom. In order to prevent this negative mindset to take root within students, one-on-one interactions between the student and teacher are needed at the beginning of all tasks and frequent communications are encouraged throughout the entire task (Lichtinger & Kaplan, 2015). In addition to constant communication
during classroom tasks teachers also need to recognize students’ need to feel connected to the classroom, curriculum, peers, and staff (Reyes et al., 2012). Students who are emotionally connected to the classroom will also be engaged in the classroom in both academic and social manners (Reyes et al., 2012).

Another factor that negatively impacts student engagement, motivation, and achievement within the classroom are policies that focus on reducing the achievement gap between poor and rich students. Crawford et al. (2017) conducted a study that demonstrated one of the main reasons why children from low-socio economic backgrounds fall behind their more advantaged peers is because they are unable to go to different secondary schools. Crawford et al. (2017) suggested that policymakers who are interested in improving the education motivation and achievement of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds need to create policies that allow all students access to good schools. Lee et al. (2015) noted a lot of policy attention has been focused on trying to improve the achievement of poor children; however it was discovered that students who attend the same secondary school as initially low-achieving poor children seem to be keeping up with their richer initially low-achieving peers. This suggests that policies aimed at reducing the achievement gap between students with average to high-socio economic status and students with low-socio economic statuses have been focused on those low-socio economic students with initially low achievement in the elementary grades rather than focusing on all low-socio economic students who continue to face challenges throughout their school career.

A final factor which negatively affects student engagement, motivation and achievement in the classroom is low-socio economic status of students and families. Dudaite (2016) explored which factors had the biggest impact on student achievement in Lithuania. Most former studies showed that student achievement is greatly affected by socio-economic factors that prevent
guardians from being able to meet students’ basic needs. Therefore the author wanted to focus on Lithuania since it is a country with limited economic resources. According to Dudaite, student achievement was impacted by a student’s socio-economic background and their guardian’s ability to provide for basic needs, as well as their academic needs. The goal of this text is to demonstrate how socio-economic factors impact student achievement. Dudaite (2016) hypothesized socio-economic factors would play a vital role in student achievement. Similar to Dudaite’s study Dierendonck et al. (2019) revealed students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often engage in misconduct when they believe they are not being provided for by their school system. Students are greatly affected by unmet needs both in the home and at school, and once educators, administrators, and policy makers realize the vast impact low socio-economic factors plays on student achievement, changes can be made to assist these students.

**Positive Factors**

When focusing on increasing student engagement, motivation, and achievement, educators have been employing not only new teaching strategies, but new social, emotional, and behavioral strategies that can greatly improve their students’ overall well-being (Burns & Botzakis, 2016). One strategy that many school systems have begun to use is the technique of Mindfulness (Harpin et al., 2016). Mindfulness focuses on the now, being present, and often just breathing. After receiving the Mindfulness Intervention instruction students’ ability to focus in class increased, their positive participation within the classroom environment rose, their ability to communicate more effectively with their peers and teachers grew, and their levels of frustration lowered. The students also noted that they shared what they learned with peers in other classes, which helped to de-escalate challenging peer relationships and situations (Harpin et al., 2016).
In order for teachers to reach students where they are, school systems need to determine students’ social and emotional abilities and provide them with instruction on how to maintain their social and emotional health.

In addition to working with students on Mindfulness strategies, research has also demonstrated the need for students to believe they are a part of and belong to their classroom community, as well as part of the decisions being made about them and their education (Karakus, 2017). When students believe they are a valued member of the classroom they begin to reach out to their peers, as well as their teacher more frequently. This then leads to the student being more willing to take on new tasks and tasks they once believed were too challenging (Marshik et al., 2017). Through continued encouragement students build their autonomy within themselves and the classroom, leading to further success and decision making that provides the students with the motivation they need to succeed.

Finally, teachers’ attitudes and interactions with students have the ability to positively impact student motivation, engagement, achievement, and progress within the classroom. Fitzpatrick et al. (2016) discuss how teachers’ perceptions of students and their ability to perform in the classroom can be greatly impacted by their appearance and demeanor. Additionally, Fitzpatrick et al. (2016) discovered students often doubt their own abilities based on how they perceive themselves in comparison to their peers. However, it was determined that student perception was positively affected, resulting in increased motivation, when teachers refrained from judging students based on appearance and demeanor and worked to become a partner with the student throughout the school year (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). When students recognize teachers see them for who they are, believe in their academic abilities, and know that their teachers are willing to partner with them throughout their academic year, student motivation
increases (Bashant, 2016). Bashant (2016) argues the value of the hope theory; a theory that assumes people are goal-oriented and motivation levels will increase when hope is instilled in students by their teachers and presented with a task that they are challenged to work towards. Students are more willing to take risks, challenge themselves, and persevere in the classroom, when in the past they would have given up, if they are being instructed by a teacher who has high motivation and classroom morale (Abazaoglu & Aztekin, 2016). Student motivation, engagement, and achievement levels increase when their teachers are enthusiastic, appreciative of the students’ work and willingness to take risks, and proud of the school (Abazaoglu & Aztekin, 2016). Teachers’ attitudes and beliefs can positively impact student engagement, motivation, and achievement within the classroom if those attitudes and beliefs are uplifting and inspiring.

**Parental Rejection and Impact on Students in the Classroom**

Parental engagement goes beyond being present at home with their child; it takes into consideration how involved the parent is in the child’s education. Adamski et al. (2013) determined parental involvement has a significant impact on student achievement and concluded disadvantaged students, who are part of the low-income and single-parent families, are more likely to experience parental rejection, enter school with unmet physiological needs, and struggle academically, socially, and behaviorally at school. In order for students to succeed in the classroom they need a supportive home that will provide for their basic needs in addition to being involved in their education (Joshi & Acharya, 2013).

Parental rejection of children manifests itself in various forms; it not only affects a child’s physical well-being when they are facing neglect of basic physiological needs, but also impacts the child’s mental and emotional health. Maslow recognized that the basic physiological needs
are food, water, shelter and rest, and demonstrated that when these needs are not met adequately an individual is unable to progress throughout their life in a meaningful way, utilizing motivation to assist them in their pursuits (Maslow, 1954). Parental rejection also affects a child’s emotional well-being. When parents exhibit high levels of psychological control over their children, the children’s level of rejection sensitivity increases, as well as their relational aggression (Lee & Park, 2016). Children entering the school system are greatly impacted by their home environment. Children’s social capital, one’s sense of identity and ability to build interpersonal relationships, is strongly tied to the bonds they build with their parents (Parcel & Bixby, 2016). Children’s cognition and their social adjustments are impacted by their social capital (Parcel & Bixby, 2016). In order to ensure all students are prepared for the classroom expectations and social interactions throughout the school day, the school system needs to consider the current mental health of their students, their ability to bond with others at school, and whether all basic physiological needs are being met.

When a parent is unwilling or unable to provide any or all of these basic physiological needs, the school system must establish practices that can be put in place to assist these students. By addressing the unmet physiological needs of students, schools are providing the basic supplies and foundations students need in order to enter the classroom ready to learn and grow alongside their peers that come to school with their needs already met at home. Every state within the Union is mandated to provide breakfast and lunch for students who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program (Smith, 2019). Through this daily practice students all over the United States are being fed breakfast and lunch at school, when in the past they would have gone hungry, negatively impacting their school day and ability to address academic work. Jones et al. (2018) revealed students who qualify for free and reduced lunch experienced similar
disadvantages as their low-income peers, such as lower levels of educational achievement, higher dropout rates, and were more likely to have conflicts with their parents. Although the free and reduced lunch program is beneficial, necessary, and able to positively impact millions of students every day, schools need to do more to ensure that all students who can qualify for this program are taking advantage of it and help foster relationships between families in need and community organizations that can provide assistance outside of the school day.

Schools need to also look beyond the thirst and hunger needs presented when parents are unable to or refuse to take care of their children physically and begin to focus on the emotional needs of these students. The social and emotional health and well-being of students has become a significant concern of school systems across the United States (Oved, 2017). Newland et al. (2019) reported a child’s emotional well-being is dependent on their current emotional development and affects their development in other areas. Therefore, Newland et al. (2019) argue schools need to be cognizant of their students’ emotional well-being. Students’ emotional health was affected by both positive and negative interactions within the classroom, as well as the season, indicating the need for schools and teachers to reflect on their classroom practices and their ability to assist students when their emotional well-being needs assistance (Newland et al., 2019).

Finally, school systems must address the safety and security needs also brought about by parents’ lack of ability or willingness to provide for their children. Oved (2017) argues that meeting the basic needs of thirst and hunger are not good enough. Schools need to recognize the importance of feeling safe and secure, as well as feeling a part of the school community and cared for (Oved, 2017). The feelings of belongingness and being cared for are an aspect of safety and security that most school systems overlook (Froiland et al., 2019). However, in order
for schools to truly meet all needs of their students they need to recognize how belongingness and caring are associated with safety and security and begin to create programs that encourage positive relationships and communications between all persons within the school system and establish a school climate that makes every student feel loved, cared for, and safe (Froiland et al., 2019).

**School Climate**

School climate is the overall environment, culture, and character of a school. School climate is established by the administrators, teachers, students, and parents (Thapa & Cohen, 2017). Children spend a large portion of their early life in the school system, interacting with their peers and teachers. Therefore, the climate and culture of a school system has a significant impact on the educational experience and social-emotional well-being of the students (Eres & Bilasa, 2017). Eres and Bilasa (2017) reported the main function of school systems is to educate students, however, they continued to argue that students’ safety and happiness, as well as their social and psychological development are necessary for academic success and need to become a focus of all school systems. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the school system, policy makers, and staff to create a positive environment where students can grow academically, emotionally, and socially (Bryson & Childs, 2018).

A school’s climate and culture is based on the school’s and community’s values, goals, interpersonal relationships, teaching practices, and learning styles (Thapa & Cohen, 2017). Even though all stakeholders within the school system play a contributing role to the school climate and culture the individual who has the most impact is the school administrator (Moller, 2012). The school administrator has the ability to make decisions, create structures, and implement procedures that uplift the school community or tear it down. Therefore, school administrators
need to understand they will have a multi-dimensional role and appearance within the school system and surrounding community because they will be working with many individuals among a variety of tasks (Moller, 2012). Additionally, school administrations need to be seen as more than just the manager of the school. School administration needs to be recognized as leaders everyone can and should aspire to be, team builders, coaches, visionaries, and agents of change (Jenkins et al., 2018). Moller (2012) reported the principals who were most successful in building a positive school climate and cultivating a community of learners among all stakeholders, were those who communicated clearly with all stakeholders and allowed for others within the school system to make suggestions and take on responsibility. School climate and culture is apparent within every school system, however, not every school climate is beneficial for students and staff members.

In order for students and staff to be productive within the school system, the school climate and culture needs to be positive and encouraging (Dogan, 2017). Dogan (2017) reported school systems are now recognizing the importance of a positive school climate and its ability to positively affect student performance within the classroom. Additionally, Riekie et al. (2017) studied the relationship between school climate and student mental health. In order to positively impact students’ mental well-being, schools need to establish a school climate where students feel safe, are able to ask for help, and believe they can reach their goals (Riekie et al., 2017). School climate greatly affects student achievement, belongingness, and behavior.

School climate has the ability to significantly impact all areas of a student’s life. School climate studies have differed on what best practices should be used to create a positive school climate. Riekie et al. (2017) believed that school climate grew from positive interactions. Their research demonstrated genuine communication and authentic relationships lead to a positive
school climate. Thapa and Cohen (2017) focused on systematic approaches school systems could utilize to improve their school climate. Although both studies evaluated two methods to approach changing school climate they both resulted in positive growth among school climate and students’ overall achievement, motivation, and attitudes (Riekie et al., 2017; Thapa & Cohen, 2017).

**Negative Factors**

Negative school climates breed poor student achievement, decreased graduation rates, facilitates bullying, allows for violence, and produces more divisions among student groups (youth.gov). It was determined that if a student had a low opinion of the school, due to lack of school climate, their achievement levels, sense of community, and sense of belongingness was also low, and bullying among students was on the rise (Karakus, 2017). Bullying continues to greatly impact all schools and impedes the learning of many students (Karakus, 2017). 49% of US students in grades 4-12 have experienced bullying (stopbully.gov). 30% of US students in grades 6-12 have admitted to bullying others (stopbully.gov). 70.6% of US students in grades 6-12 have witnessed bullying within their schools (stopbully.gov). 15% of US students in grades 9-12 have experienced cyberbullying in the last year (stopbully.gov). Although many students have been bullied only 20% of those students have reported the bullying to an adult (stopbully.gov). Negative school climates and continual bullying can lead to feelings of isolation, rejection, exclusion, despair, depression, anxiety, and at times suicide (Karakus, 2017).

Akkanat and Gokdere (2018) stated that teachers and school climate together, influence student motivation in the classroom. However, Hammonds (2017) argued that teachers only have the ability to influence their individual classroom community and often are greatly affected by the overall school climate. Teachers experience extreme amounts of stress and frustration,
often leading to high teacher turn over, when the overall school climate is unable to produce positive outcomes (Hammonds, 2017). Ch et al. (2017) evaluated leadership styles of administrators in order to determine what aspects of current administration techniques negatively impact the overall school climate and teacher job satisfaction. It was determined that autocratic leadership, leadership that rarely allows for open dialogue or provides for freedom within the context of one’s classroom and content area, negatively impacts teachers, students, and school climate (Ch et al., 2017). Administrators are harming the climate and culture of the school when their communication is unclear and inconsistent, and they remove the teachers’ ability to help make meaningful decisions for the school. Hammonds (2017) relayed that in order for teachers to remain in the classroom and create beneficial and caring environments for their students, administrators need to evaluate the current school climate and begin making changes that support teachers and focus on student well-being and disruptive behaviors.

**Positive Factors**

Positive school climates are necessary when trying to meet students’ basic, physiological needs of safety and security. A positive school climate contributes to student success, fosters connectedness through meaningful relationships, creating a sense of safety and freedom from violence (youth.gov). Wong et al. (2019) argued school climate is unable to be measured, but the impact of a positive school climate is evident through the apparent behaviors of the students. Students attending a school with a positive school climate are engaged, respectful, and make decisions that have positive impacts on their life and the life of the school community (Wong et al., 2019). When school systems actively seek to create and uphold procedures that enable all students and staff members to feel included, safe, and cared for while in the school community, students show academic growth and increased interpersonal
relationships, and school staff demonstrate feelings of happiness and believe they are able to contribute to the overall well-being of the school community (Wellenreiter, 2018).

Schools are now beginning to embrace methods that will increase their positive school climate (Turhan & Tulin, 2017). Through the use of conflict resolution techniques, goal setting, continued communication, and community outreach, schools are able to change their culture from within. Thapa and Cohen (2017) determined that students and parents were more trusting of the school system when the school implemented community activities within the school and worked with community resources to assist families. Additionally, Lee and Li (2015) revealed that when administration take an active role in establishing school climate and culture through specific directives and actions, everyone is positively impacted. Administrators who first focused on campus ethics and expectations, encouraged staff members to embrace these beliefs and participated in open communication, provided a foundation for the entire school system that demonstrated the value of respect and comradery (Lee & Li, 2015). Similarly, Sari et al. (2019) determined when a school system is managed properly and administrators are able to provide the organization with the needed infrastructure to operate efficiently- teachers with the freedom to be creative and students with the support they need- a positive school climate is cultivated and embraced by all stakeholders.

**Student-Teacher Relationships**

Students are entering their classrooms with increased needs: academic, emotional, social, behavioral, and physical (De Jong, 2016). As more students enter the classroom with an increasing amount of non-academic needs teachers must consider what effective teaching practices they will employ to meet their students’ needs. Farmer (2018) argues teachers need to focus not only on understanding their content area, setting high expectations, and engaging
students in their lessons, but also on their relationships with their students and meeting their needs that go beyond academic needs. Students who are not having their basic, psychological needs met are unable to meaningfully participate in their daily life and greatly benefit from positive student-teaching relationships (Lonn & Dantzler, 2017). Positive student-teacher relationships within the classroom have the ability to influence students to work harder within the classroom and strive for their goals (Farmer, 2018).

In order for students to succeed in the classroom they must feel cared for, not only by their family, but also by their friends and teachers (Froiland et al., 2019). Student-teacher relationships no longer consist solely of a teacher presenting a new concept to their students and helping them master that skill. Rather student-teacher relationships are now considered to be foundational for both students’ academic and emotional growth (Cook et al., 2018). Students need to know and believe their teachers value them and their place within the classroom (Wilcox et al., 2016). When students believe they are not wanted they begin to tune out what is going on around them and refuse to engage with anyone within that environment.

Students who exhibit both social and behavioral issues often enter the classroom with these behaviors already established (Bruhn et al., 2017). Gollub et al. (2019) reported a large amount of children in the United States experience or witness violence within their homes and communities leading to post-traumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder symptoms. Gollub et al. (2019) determined a direct association between economic difficulties, exposure to violence, and mental health symptoms. However, student-teacher relationships significantly affect how social and behavioral issues manifest within the classroom (Zee & Roorda, 2018). Student-teacher relationships have the ability to both positively and negatively affect all interactions and outcomes produced by the student.
Negative Factors

More and more students are entering the school system with social, emotional, and behavioral needs (Garwood et al., 2017). Therefore, schools need to begin providing social, emotional, and behavioral education programs within the regular education classroom. However, some school systems and educators are resistant to this idea and often engage in negative interactions with these students often producing more aggressive, self-harming behaviors (Zee & Roorda, 2018). Additionally, teachers feel unprepared to address social, emotional, and extreme behavioral needs, due to their lack of understanding of mental health issues and activities that can be used to help students with these needs (Ekornes, 2017). Teachers are not prepared to handle the mental health needs of their students. Therefore, the American School Counselor Association suggests school should have at least one school counselor for a minimum of 250 students in every public school system due to the increase in students’ socioemotional development needs (Naik, 2019). Although counselors should handle the ever growing social and emotional needs of the student population, teachers can still assist their students in the classroom by reaching out to them on a human level. Student-teacher interactions, conversations, and relationships significantly affect how a student behaves and responds within the classroom (Ekornes, 2017). Student behavior is challenging to change, however, no change is experienced when teachers are ineffectual and unwilling to connect with their students or attempt to meet their social and emotional needs.

Hanscombe et al. (2011) determined that chaotic homes lead to poor school performance, behavior, attitudes, and unwillingness to interact with or attempt a relationship with school staff. Genetic, as well as environment factors, lead to chaotic homes and significantly affect student achievement (Hanscombe et al., 2011). It is believed that when children experience chaotic
homes, where basic needs are not met, they are unable to perform well at school. Hanscombe et al. (2011) demonstrated students’ from home chaotic homes not only suffer academically, but also socially with peers and teachers. Cook et al. (2018) revealed behavioral problems in the elementary classroom have resulted in a bidirectional effect on student-teacher relationships associated with strained student-teacher relationships and teacher ratings of students’ academic abilities. In order for schools to combat the effects resulting from students entering schools from chaotic homes, Garas-York (2010) argues teachers need to recognize where their students are coming from and begin to meet their social and emotional needs first, before they begin to address academic needs. Chaotic home environments have a negative impact on student achievement, as well as student-teacher relationships because they provide no social or emotional foundations for children or the understanding of trusting relationships.

A teacher’s ability to connect with their students is vital in every classroom (Cook et al., 2018). When teachers approach the classroom as just that, a classroom, they are already closing themselves off to any future potential their students may have. Hernandez et al. (2017) reveals the need for students to feel connected to their teacher in order to truly learn in an authentic, meaningful ways. Cook et al. (2018) argued the feeling of belongingness is similar to the need for food and stated that even though most teachers support the need for positive student-teacher relationships, they do not intentionally participate in any activities to build or improve upon their relationships with their students. Elementary students are often the most affected by poor student-teacher relationships, low classroom environment climate, and negative responses from their teachers (Turhan & Tulin, 2017). Additionally, when elementary students experience a classroom or teacher that incorporates negativity on a regular basis they are more likely to experience low test scores, high anxiety, and continued frustration with school in later years.
(Turhan & Tulin, 2017). Educators need to recognize the impact they have on their students and consider the climate and culture they are creating within the walls of their classroom.

**Positive Factors**

With more and more students entering the classroom with unmet basic physiological needs, lack of parental involvement, and increased social, emotional, and behavioral concerns educators have begun to focus on meeting these needs in addition to providing academic instruction (Jeffrey et al., 2013). When teachers attempted to meet these needs they were able to create a relationship with the student which then positively affected the student’s achievement in the classroom (Jeffrey et al., 2013). Additionally, when educators recognized the importance that both the home environment and the school system have on a child’s development and academic achievement, and began to partner with parents, positive relationships were built between the teacher and the parent, as well as the teacher and student which lead to further assistance because a foundation of trust had been established (Epstein et al., 2011).

Through a parent-teacher partnership, the knowledge and acceptance of a healthy lifestyle can be developed and implemented, which has the ability to transform the life of a child (Healthy Students and Better Learners, 2016). Factors related to hunger, physical and emotional abuse, and illness can lead to poor school performance, however, when teachers and school systems provide education, resources, and support related to health programs to families, students have shown improved academics in the classroom and better health (Healthy Students are Better Learners, 2016). Similarly, Butler (2016) concluded that students who enter the classroom stressed and overwhelmed from obstacles they face outside of the school system have a higher likelihood to display disruptive behaviors and achieve lower test scores. Students with high levels of emotional stress are able to succeed within the classroom when their teachers are aware
of what they are experiencing at home, allowing the teacher to understand the emotional state of the student, and in turn teachers are able to provide for the student through caring relationships and genuine activities that interest them (Butler, 2016). By establishing positive relationships and utilizing clear communication and friendly discourse with parents and students, teachers are able to assist parents and students by equipping them with the knowledge, resources, and support necessary to improve the child’s physical and mental health (Healthy Students are Better Learners, 2016).

Student-teacher relationships have the ability to reshape the functions of the school system, the interactions of individuals, and the perception students have of themselves and their role within the school culture (Cook et al., 2018). With more and more students entering the public school system with extreme shyness, anxiety, and emotional problems teachers and school systems are having to combat these concerns and create resiliency within students by adopting new social, emotional, and behavioral programs (Crum et al., 2017). These programs call for students and teachers to interact on a different level, allowing them to converse one-on-one or within a small group. Through these interactions students and teachers are changing the way they view one another and building relationships that positively affect the entire school climate (Zee & Roorda, 2018). When students believe they are a part of their classroom and school community they begin to approach school with a renewed mindset that enables and encourages them to take on academic challenges and social interactions they would never have attempted in the past.

**Characteristics and Qualities of Effective and Inspiring Teachers**

Teachers have the ability to inspire their students in many ways. Students are no longer entering school just to gain an education, but they are entering the classroom hungry, dirty, and
often scared, thus forcing teachers to not only educate their students, but provide for them in ways that was once provided for in the home (Newcomer, 2018). Teachers who positively impact the lives of their students embrace and radiate characteristics and qualities that empower their students. Mantzicopoulos et al. (2018) argue that determining a teacher’s effectiveness is challenging, however, a teacher’s effectiveness is apparent when their students are not only achieving academically, but thriving emotionally and actively engaged in the classroom lesson and environment. In order to empower more students so that they are socially and academically engaged in the classroom, teachers need to embrace change within their classroom, often honing in on their current knowledge and skills as an educator, while also utilizing new teaching methods and ideas that reach student where they are, not where teachers think they should be (Steinbrenner & Watson, 2015).

Classroom management has the ability to enhance a classroom so that growth is fostered and students are actively engaged. However, lack of classroom management leads to significant problems where disruptive behaviors arise and instructional time is wasted (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016). Effective teachers establish consistent routines and explain well-defined rules, often modeling what expected behaviors look like, and recognize that not all students will enter their classroom with a clear understanding of what appropriate behaviors look like (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016). Similarly, Kouzes and Posner (2017) describe effective, inspirational leadership as someone who is able to impress upon others the values necessary for success through their clear example and positive interaction with others. Teachers who are able to address unwanted behaviors without putting the student down are able to positively impact the student, their behaviors, and learning because they are taking into consideration the emotional well-being of the student (Ruzek et al., 2016).
Teachers have been trained to have high expectations for their students. However, few are able to impart these expectations on to their students without causing confusion, frustration, and disheartening attitudes (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016). Effective teachers set their expectations extremely high, but are comfortable with themselves and their students when those expectations are not met (Ruzek et al., 2016). Inspirational teachers use those unmet expectations as teachable moments and to encourage their students to persevere (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016). Students continue to improve and make substantial academic gains even when they are struggling in the classroom when they recognize that their teacher has a positive attitude towards them and that their teacher believes in the student’s abilities to succeed (Leggio & Terras, 2019).

In addition to setting high expectations effective teachers utilize evidence-based practices and continually participate in high-quality professional development (Conroy et al., 2019). Effective teachers also utilize the choice teaching strategy in order to engage students, while demonstrating to the students that the teacher believes in them and their decision making skills (Lane, 2015). Choice allows students to be further engaged in the content and task at hand, while building the students’ self-esteem (Lane, 2015).

Effective teachers take into consideration their students’ well-being and emotional needs, recognizing that these needs are critical for student success and for high quality instruction to take place in the classroom (Ruzek et al., 2016). When provided with emotional support from their classroom teacher students’ engagement, motivation, and behaviors were positively impacted (Ruzek et al., 2016). By focusing on and providing for both academic and emotional needs teachers are meeting their students where they are when they walk through the classroom door (Leggio & Terras, 2019).
Student-teacher relationships have the ability to impact student performance within the classroom. Authentic, caring student-teacher relationships not only improved student behaviors within the classroom, but also positively affected student engagement (Newcomer, 2018). When teachers demonstrate that they cared about their students as people, not just learners, they are able to build genuine relationships that allow students to feel valued and unique (Hutchinson, 2015). Teachers who possess the ability to really listen to their students have proven to be more effective than teachers who focus solely on curriculum (Leggio & Terras, 2019).

**Teacher Influence on Student Sub-Groups**

Students who lack motivation and are often disengaged within the classroom come from all backgrounds and walks of life. Effective teachers are able to meet the needs of all of their students through the use of best teaching practices, focusing on the emotional well-being of their students while fostering student-teacher relationships that build the student’s self-worth (Ruzek et al., 2016). However, effective teachers also recognize that minority students often struggle more within the classroom, often demonstrating a lack of engagement, than their white counterparts because they face prejudice, additional difficulties within the school system, and outside factors that non-minority students do not experience (Ing et al., 2015). Newcomer (2017) determined Latino students who struggle greatly in the classroom due to low self-esteem and poor relationships significantly benefited when they felt they were truly cared for by their teacher. Henry and Thorsen (2018) stated students entering the American classroom with English as their second language demonstrated more motivation and higher levels of achievement when their teacher purposefully strived to maintain a positive relationship with the student. Students with emotional/behavior disorders experienced academic success in the regular
education classroom when they believed their relationship with the regular education teacher was unconditional, allowing the student to start fresh each day (Leggio & Terras, 2019).

**Summary**

Students are often judged by their teachers and peers based on their ability level, as well as their physical appearance when they enter their school building every day. However, most students who come to school underfed, unkempt, and unprepared lack parental concern and often face parent rejection. Their parents are unable or unwilling to make sure their basic needs are met. Additionally, many of these parents are too overwhelmed with life or not motivated themselves to become involved in their student’s academic and school life. However, when these students are provided for, their behaviors adjust, attitudes shift, motivation levels change, and academic achievement increases. Through physiological need provision these students can considerably change how they interact within the school system. Educators, administrators, and policymakers need to understand how drastically unmet physiological needs affect student motivation and academic achievement, as well as how positive student-teacher relationships and school climates can alter the effects of unmet physiological needs. Through in-depth understanding of this dilemma and the literature related to it, changes can be made in the school system so all students will have their basic needs met, experience feelings of caring and belongingness, and begin to set goals that now are attainable. Maslow’s theory of hierarchy of needs set the ground work for all educators, explaining how met needs and human motivation go hand in hand with one another. Therefore the goal of this case study was to evaluate current research on the connections between student-teacher relationships and student motivation in the classroom, taking into consideration the current school climate, while also exploring the methods
that teachers and school systems are using to build positive relationships with their students while using school resources to meet any unmet physiological needs.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study will be to develop an in-depth understanding of how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation within the upper elementary classroom for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students at a small, rural school in southeastern Pennsylvania. Student motivation directly affects student achievement in the classroom (Kilbourne et al., 2017). However, one often wonders what directly affects student motivation (Hernandez et al., 2017). Educators have begun to question how student engagement within their classrooms impacts student motivation, as well as the factors that influence whether or not a student is engaged in their academic experience (Crum et al., 2017). Recent research has started to suggest student-teacher relationships have a significant impact on student engagement (Marshik et al., 2017). Marshik et al.’s (2017) study is significant because it corresponds with additional research that indicates if a student has a positive relationship with their teacher they will be more willing to participate in class, therefore improving their engagement level which directly affects their motivation and achievement within the classroom (Ing et al, 2015). The case study method allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena and gain insight through practical application in the natural setting of the classroom (Yin, 2018). The design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, and researcher’s roles are presented in this chapter, along with data collection procedures, data analysis methods, and explanation of trustworthiness.

Design

This research followed a qualitative design using a multiple case study approach. A qualitative multiple case study was used to understand the connections between student-teacher
relationships and student motivation in the upper elementary classroom. A multiple case study approach was utilized because of its characteristics of assessment through multiple factors organized around two or more cases (Yin, 2018). The study included three cases. Each case was comprised of one teacher participant and three student participants from the same classroom.

Yin (2018) stated case study research is designed to reflect on details from the viewpoint of the participants using multiple sources of data. This approach utilizes open-ended questions that allow participants to explain their perspectives, personal experiences, and beliefs (Yin, 2018). The case study design, where analytical focus of an intrinsic case study emphasizes the differences among the relationships throughout the case study, is an appropriate choice because the group of individuals selected for this study are people who share a common experience (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The study consisted of different interview questions for classroom teachers and students, as well as focus group questions. The qualitative research design was selected because it describes teachers’ and students’ perceptions of student-teacher relationships and how they are connected to student motivation in the classroom. Each case of teacher and student perceptions was studied individually, as well as collectively, to determine similarities and differences through the process of collecting data from teachers and students to achieve competency during the study.

The purpose of this case study research was to investigate a phenomenon within its real-life context and in which multiple sources of evidence were used (Yin, 2018). Since the focus of the study was on an issue of concern, the connection between student-teacher relationships and student motivation within the upper elementary classroom, the multiple case study approach was used within three classrooms. This enables the researcher to depict multiple perspectives from the different case studies and allows the researcher to avoid making generalizations between the
case studies. Multiple case study research was used to gain a more in-depth understanding on the complex issue of student-teacher relationships and how they are connected to student motivation in the classroom in the context of real-life presentations.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

Central Question

How are student-teacher relationships connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom?

Guiding Questions

Guiding Question 1

What affect does unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs have on students in the classroom?

Guiding Question 2

How are teachers meeting the unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs of their students?

Guiding Question 3

How do teachers build relationships with their students in the classroom?

Setting

The study took place in a small rural elementary school (SRES) in central Pennsylvania. SRES has 1,125 total students in grades kindergarten through sixth grade, with the racial/ethnic demographics being 70% White, 17% Hispanic, 6% Multi-Racial/Ethnic, 5% Black (Non-Hispanic), 1% Unclassified, less than 1% American Indian/Alaskan, and less than 1% Asian/Pacifica Islander, and the gender demographic of 47% male and 53% female. Forty
percent of the SRES student population qualify for free and reduced lunch (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019). SRES has three separate elementary school buildings on the same campus. The first building houses kindergarten, first and second grade. The second building houses third and fourth grade. The third building houses fifth and sixth grade. Each building has one principal, one intervention specialist, one guidance counselor, and one nurse. The building with kindergarten through second grade has two reading specialists, while the second and third buildings have one reading specialist each.

This school district was selected because of its unique set up with three different buildings housing their elementary school population on the same campus. By utilizing three buildings, with three different leadership staffs and structures, this school system allows its students to undergo many transitions throughout their elementary school career. These transitions may add to or take away from their students’ feelings of belongingness and ability to fit into each individual building’s school climate and culture. Additionally, SRES has seen substantial growth in the free and reduced lunch population (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019). An increasing number of SRES students are experiencing chaotic home situations, coming to school underfed and unprepared to learn, and lacking motivation within the classroom.

**Participants**

There are 23 teachers who teach fourth, fifth, or sixth grade at the SRES and 473 students currently enrolled in fourth, fifth, and sixth grade at SRES. This study includes 12 participants: three teachers and nine students. Participants for this study were determined through the use of purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used when selecting a case or cases with rich information to illuminate the question being investigated (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Selective
criteria requires teachers available for this study to have taught for five years or more and currently teach fourth, fifth or sixth grade at SRES. Teachers who have taught for five years or more are able to participate in this study because research has demonstrated teachers with a minimum of five years’ experience are able to create a climate and culture within their classrooms that assists students’ in their academic and social needs (Ihtiyaroglu & Demirbolat, 2016). The school administration provided a list of teachers who met this criteria. Those teachers received an email explaining the study and asking for volunteers. After the study was explained to possible participating teachers one teacher from fourth, fifth, and sixth grade volunteered to be a part of the study. Then school administration provided a list of students within those teachers’ classrooms to the researcher. The parents of those students received a letter explaining the study and asking for consent for their child to be a part of the study. The student responses to the first invitation to participate in the study were evaluated and if necessary, a second invitation was mailed out in order to ensure there was a mix of students that represented diverse economic backgrounds involved in the study. More than the needed number of students consented to be a part of the study so the researcher randomly selected students to participate. Once all participants were identified, pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identity and privacy.

**Procedures**

Prior to submitting my application to the Liberty University’s IRB, I obtained approval from the superintendent of schools for the selected school district to conduct this research study. (See Appendix A). In addition, prior to submitting my application to Liberty University’s IRB, an expert review of the interview questions, focus group questions, and surveys was conducted by my dissertation team to review the data collection tools for content validity. All members of
my dissertation team have earned Doctorate degrees and are well versed in the field of education. The dissertation team have ensured that all questions on the data collection tools will yield the results needed to answer the research questions.

Once I received approval for the study from Liberty University’s IRB, I spoke with the school’s principal to determine possible teacher participants by reviewing the list of fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers who have taught for five or more years. When the list of possible teacher participants was created, I emailed each possible teacher participant to determine who was interested in participating in the study. Having received more than one teacher per grade interested in the study, I randomly selected a teacher from fourth, fifth, and sixth grade by pulling names out of a hat in order to determine which teachers would participate in the study.

Once the teacher participants were selected, I obtained a list of students within each teacher participant’s classroom. I then sent out a letter to the parents of the students in these classrooms asking for participants and consent for these students to engage in the study. Having received more than three interested students from each participating classroom, I put all possible student names from each classroom into a hat and randomly drew three names for each classroom. Those students selected became the student participants. The participants received anonymity throughout the study and had the option of leaving the study at any time.

At the beginning of the study I distributed surveys to all participants, as well as conducted individual interviews with all participants. I then concluded the study by holding a focus group with all participants in attendance. I collected data from the surveys, interviews, and focus group. I recorded and transcribed the interviews and focus group. All of this data was analyzed to determine patterns and themes found among student-teacher relationships and student motivation.
The Researcher's Role

I have an intrinsic desire to understand the connection between student-teacher relationships and student motivation in the upper elementary classroom because I currently teach in an upper elementary classroom. I have a vested interest in the students and teachers of SRES because I am currently teaching at this school, working alongside these teachers and helping to plan curriculum and establish programs for these students. For this study I served as the human instrument to collect and analyze data to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers can build relationships with students within the classroom. I took on the role of the interpreter to evaluate and connect meaning to how student-teacher relationships connect with student motivation (Stake, 1995).

I am currently a fifth grade inclusive elementary teacher at SRES. I have taught fifth and sixth grade special education, as well as fifth and sixth grade regular education in the public school system, SRES, for 14 years. I am currently pursuing a doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction in order to determine best practices that can improve my classroom methods, as well as provide insight for my colleagues. I believe that every person was created for a purpose and that my purpose in life is to minister to public school students through compassionate actions, grace filled moments, and uplifting communications.

Therefore, the philosophical assumption that lead to my research was epistemological, because I relied on perceived feelings as evidence from the participants, in addition to working among the participants, observing them within the classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Postpositivism helped shape this study because the study examined multiple perspectives from various participants in order to determine how positive student-teacher relationships affect students and their current situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My personal assumption is that
students will be more motivated to achieve in the classroom when they know their teacher cares about them, when they know they are safe at school, and when they know someone believes in them, even when they do not believe in themselves.

A bias could exist since I have grown up in this community and work with the teachers who may be a part of the study. Due to my detailed knowledge of the community, teachers, and students I may have described actions within the classroom to a depth that others would not notice or recognize as such. Additionally, I might have described what I observed in a more realistic light since I understand the school, teachers, and students in a more personal manner. In order to combat this bias and assumption, I took ongoing notes of reflection to expose personal bias and listened to interviewees with neutrality (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection

No data was collected until approval was granted from Liberty University’s IRB. Multiple data collection tools were used to collect a variety of data that provided a better understanding of the connections between student-teacher relationships and student motivation in the upper elementary classroom (Yin, 2018). Three data collection methods were used throughout this study in order to provide answers to the research questions. The first data collection method was surveys. Yin (2018) stated a survey can be used to address the phenomenon and context, but it can pose a challenge in investing the context. The second form of data collection was interviews with teachers and students. This form of data collection was selected because it allowed the researcher to ask open-ended questions that established a baseline for the study while getting at the heart of each participant’s personal experience and belief system (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The third data collection method was focus groups. This form of data collection was selected because it allowed the researcher to continue to ask open-ended
questions while allowing participants to hear one another and add on to each other’s comments (Tracy, 2013).

**Surveys**

A survey was used as a data source at the beginning of the study. Although surveys are often associated with quantitative studies, Yin (2018) determined survey data can be used to provide more holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied. I used surveys to increase credibility of the study. The convergence of this data provided a more in-depth understanding of the whole phenomenon through the use of open-ended questions. All participants received surveys at the beginning of the study. I used Google Forms to send the surveys. Participants had one-week to complete the online survey (Appendix G).

**Open-Ended Survey Questions (Students)**

1. Tell about your home. What is it like and how do you feel there?
2. Tell about your family. Who do you live with and what are they like?
3. Tell about your school. What is it like and how do you feel there?
4. Tell about your teacher. What do you like and not like about your teacher?
5. Tell about your feelings. When do you feel happy and when do you feel sad?

Questions one and two allow the student participants to reflect on their home life and family. They were asked to not only describe their home and family, but also consider how they feel when they are home and what their family is really like. Joshi and Acharya (2013) determined that students can experience success in the classroom when they come from a supportive home that is able to provide for their basic needs in addition to being involved in their education.
Questions three and four ask the student participants to evaluate what their school and teacher are like, as well as how they feel at school and about their teacher. By reflecting on their school and teacher the student participant is revealing how their current school climate and classroom culture is impacting their personal feelings of belongingness at school. Cook et al. (2018) determined student-teacher relationships have the ability to reshape the functions of the school system, the interactions of individuals, and the perception students have of themselves and their role within the school culture.

Question five allows the student participants to consider how they currently feel and determine when they feel happy and sad. This question provides student participants the opportunity to really evaluate what makes them feel what they feel and why it makes them feel that way. Newland et al. (2019) reported a child’s emotional well-being is dependent on their current emotional development and affects their development in other areas.

Open-Ended Survey Questions (Teachers)

1. Describe the community that surrounds your school system.

2. Describe your students. What outside factors impact their academics and motivation?

3. Describe your school system. What programs have been implemented to assist students with unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs?

4. Describe your classroom culture. What do you intentionally do to build relationships with your students?

5. Describe student success and motivation. What does it mean to you for a student to be motivated and successful in your classroom?

Questions one and two allow the teacher participants to reflect on the community surrounding their school system, the students that come from this community, and what outside
factors impact these students in the classroom. By evaluating the surrounding community and their students the teacher participants are recognizing commonalities students are experiencing within their community. Orri et al. (2019) reported the quality of support within the home is the main predictor for the cognitive and emotional health of the children within that home.

Questions three and four ask the teacher participants to evaluate the current climate of the school system, how the school system currently addresses student need, and what the teacher does intentionally to build student-teacher relationships within their classroom. By reflecting on both the intentionality of the school system, as well as the teacher within their own classroom, the teacher participant is revealing specific programs and behaviors used to meet students where they are and determine how these intention actions impact the student. Lonn and Dantzler (2017) reported students who are not having their basic, psychological needs met are unable to meaningfully participate in their daily life and greatly benefit from positive student-teaching relationships.

Question five allows the teacher participants to consider student motivation and success within their classroom, in addition to what that motivation and success look like. By evaluating what student motivation and success look like in their classroom teacher participants are able to reflect on individual students and how the teacher’s individual actions factor into the student’s performance within their classroom. Leggio and Terras (2019) reported that teachers need to focus on and provide for both academic and emotional needs of their students when they walk through the classroom door.

**Interviews**

Interviews are essential to case studies by providing a guide to a conversation through open ended, non-threatening questions (Yin, 2009). Interviews were conducted face-to-face at
the beginning of the study in the school library. These interviews took place between the researcher and each participant. Interviews had the possibility of being in-depth or focused, therefore they were recorded to ensure all conversations were captured correctly and transcribed at the conclusion of the interview by the researcher. The questions asked during the interview were open-ended, allowing the interviewer a deeper understanding into the world of the interviewee (Yin, 2018). Each type of participant responded to a set of questions specific to their role within the case study. These questions focused on the interviewee’s experiences in the classroom up until the time of the interview and their personal beliefs, viewpoints, and feelings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Confidentiality was achieved by ensuring that pseudonyms were used for all participants. Complete confidentiality was practiced throughout the study.

The student interview questions helped to answer the central question: how are student-teacher relationships connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom? They also aide in the answering of the first guiding question: how do teachers build relationships with their students in the classroom? The teacher interview questions helped to answer the second guiding question: what effect do positive student-teacher relationships have on student motivation in the classroom? Additionally, the teacher interview questions provided insight for the third guiding question: what effect do negative student-teacher relationships have on student motivation in the classroom?

**Student Interview Questions**

1. When you think of school what comes to mind?
2. What is your favorite content area (reading, math, science, or social studies) and why?
3. How do you feel when you enter the school building?
4. How do you feel when you enter your classroom?
5. How do you feel when you have to get ready to head home at the end of the school day?

6. What makes you feel safe at school?

7. What makes you feel anxious at school?

8. If you have a favorite teacher, what about them makes them your favorite teacher?

9. How do you know if a teacher cares about you?

10. Why is it important to know your teacher cares about you?

Questions one and two are knowledge questions and intended to be relatively straightforward and non-threatening, and helped to develop rapport between the participants and interviewer (Patton, 2015).

Questions three through five allowed the participants to reflect on their individual feelings about the school, their experience within the classroom, and their home environment. Back et al. (2016) suggest a high level of classroom management, continual constructive staff relations, and a positive school climate are strongly tied to student achievement and motivation. Therefore, these questions allow the participants to evaluate their feelings towards the current school climate, as well as the classroom culture and how these feelings might differ from how they feel about their life at home.

Questions six and seven require a higher level of vulnerability than the other questions, and for this reason, I choose to ask them halfway through the interview, hoping that a good rapport had been established between the participants and interviewee (Patton, 2015), allowing the participant to genuinely reflect on what contributes to their feelings of safety and security while in school.

Questions seven through ten allowed the participants to consider their current, as well as past teachers, discussing who stands out as their favorite teacher and why, in addition to
addressing the idea that teachers are able to connect with their students on multiple levels, not just as an educator. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need focuses on the physiological needs necessary for anyone to succeed in life and feel motivated to achieve more (1954). One basic need that must be met is the need of safety. Teachers are able to provide this safe environment for their students when they build a relationship with the student that allows them to feel cared for.

**Teacher Interview Questions**

1. Why did you become a teacher?
2. How would you describe your classroom?
3. How would you describe student motivation within your current classroom?
4. What factors do you think affect student motivation within the classroom?
5. How have you met safety needs of your students and is it important for you to address these needs within your classroom?
6. How have you or your school met basic physiological needs of your students is it important for you to address these needs within your classroom?
7. How have you met mental and emotion needs of your students? Is it important for you to address these needs within your classroom?
8. How important is the student-teacher relationship?
9. What role, if any, does the student-teacher relationship play within the classroom?
10. What strategies do you use on a daily basis to build relationships with your students?

Questions one and two are knowledge questions and intended to be relatively straightforward and non-threatening, and helped to develop rapport between the participants and interviewer (Patton, 2015).
Questions three and four allowed the participants to reflect on current, as well as past students’, motivation and engagement levels and how these factors affect the overall classroom and individual student achievement levels. Studies have revealed when student motivation decreases in the classroom, student engagement also declines significantly, which often leads to negative impacts on students’ ability to achieve in the classroom (Hernandez et al, 2017).

Question five through seven allowed the participants to share about how they meet the safety, physiological, mental, and emotional needs of their students. Additionally these questions asked participants to consider why meeting these needs in the classroom is essential. Riekie et al. (2017) reported in order to positively impact students, schools need to establish a school climate where students feel safe, are able to ask for help, and believe they can reach their goals.

Questions eight through ten allowed the participants to consider the idea of student-teacher relationships, their role within the classroom, and what current practices the participants are conducting that allow students to feel a part of both the school and classroom communities. Karakus (2017) revealed there is a correlation between school climate and students’ perception of belongingness, achievement, and community. Karakus (2017) determined that a negative school climate leads to a negative student perception, which greatly affects their academics and sense of community and belongingness.

**Focus Group**

Focus groups are beneficial to case studies because they allow for deeper conversations to take place because participants are able to hear one another and build off of each other’s responses and reactions (Yin, 2009). One focus group, that included the researcher and all teacher and student participants, was conducted at the end of the study in the school library. All
participants were invited to participate in the focus group, however, the researcher was aware that it was highly unlikely that all 12 participants would be available at the same time so the hope was that six to eight participants would be available to attend the focus group. The focus group consisted of nine student participants and two teacher participants. The focus group provided an opportunity for the researcher to interact with multiple participants at the same time. The researcher took into consideration that the focus group consisted of both teachers and students, and worked towards building a rapport with and among all participants so that all participants would feel comfortable speaking openly and honestly in front of the entire group. The focus group was asked a set of 10 open-ended questions and were video recorded to ensure all conversations were captured correctly and transcribed at the conclusion of the interview by the researcher. The questions asked during the focus group were open-ended, allowing the research a deeper understanding into the world of the participants (Yin, 2018). These questions focused on the interviewee’s experiences in the classroom up until the time of the interview and their personal beliefs, viewpoints, and feelings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Confidentiality was achieved by ensuring that pseudonyms were used for all participants. Complete confidentiality was practiced throughout the study.

The focus group questions helped to answer the central question: how are student-teacher relationships connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom? In addition, these questions provided insights into the three guiding questions: what affect does unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs have on students in the classroom; how are teachers meeting the unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs of their students; and how do teachers build relationships with their students in the classroom?
Focus Group Questions

1. How would you describe the climate and culture of your school?
2. What do you feel like when you are in school?
3. What is one thing you would change about your school and why?
4. How would you describe the climate and culture of your classroom?
5. What do you feel like when you are in your classroom?
6. What is one thing you would change about your classroom and why?
7. What factors do you think impact student motivation in the classroom?
8. How do you teachers help and/or provide for their students?
9. What role, if any, does the student-teacher relationship play within the classroom?
10. How important is the student-teacher relationship?

Questions one through three allowed the participants to consider the current climate and culture of the school building. After participants had the opportunity to reflect on the current climate and culture they were then given the chance to speak to areas in which the school could change in order to further build upon the current climate and culture, as well as note changes that might be necessary so that all students feel included in the current school system. Riekie et al. (2017) studied the relationship between school climate and student mental health. They determined that in order to greatly impact students, schools need to establish a school climate where students feel safe, able to ask for help, and believe they can reach their goals.

Questions four through seven allowed participants to reflect on individual classrooms, determining the current climate and culture of their classroom, as well as how they feel when they are in their classroom. Furthermore, these questions allowed participants to evaluate what factors contribute to the classroom climate and which of those factors should be changed in order
to create a more inclusive environment where students feel accepted and motivated to learn. When focusing on increasing student engagement, motivation, and achievement, educators have been employing not only new teaching strategies, but new social, emotional, and behavioral strategies that can greatly improve their students’ overall well-being (Burns & Botzakis, 2016).

Questions eight through ten allowed the conversation to open up to how, if at all, teachers provide for their students’ well-being through the meeting of needs, in addition to examining the role of student-teacher relationships within the classroom. By evaluating the role student-teacher relationships have on student motivation participants were able to determine their stance on this connectedness and provide insights into how this relationship can be used to further student motivation in the classroom. Students who exhibit both social and behavioral issues often enter the classroom with these behaviors already established (Bruhn et al., 2017). However, research has determined that the student-teacher relationship played a large role on how these behaviors manifested within the classroom (Zee & Roorda, 2018).

**Data Analysis**

The data collected throughout this study underwent direct interpretation analysis (Yin, 2018). Data analysis consisted of within-case and cross-case analyses that utilized coding of surveys, interviews, and focus group on the analysis of Yin (2018). Detailed descriptions of the surveys, interviews, and the focus group allowed for in-depth content analysis through the use of coding of key words and phrases, as well as identifying common themes, noting common experiences and exchanges between students and teachers (Tracy, 2013). Researchers are looking for a single instance to draw meaning from; establishing patterns, looking for correspondence between two or more categories (Saldana, 2016).
Data analysis procedures began with open coding by organizing data into causal conditions (what factors caused the core phenomenon), strategies (actions taken in response to the core phenomenon), contextual and intervening conditions (broad and specific situational factors that influence the strategies), and consequences (outcomes from using the strategies) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process was done by organizing data from the survey response, the interview transcripts, and the focus group transcriptions by utilizing NVivo qualitative analysis software which allowed for better organization of the data for performing analyses and interpretation of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Since this study involves multiple cases, cross-case analysis was then conducted by cross-examination of the cases to determine themes and patterns of themes across the cases which helped determine claims and interpretations of the meaning across the cases (Yin, 2018). Once themes had been identified data was organized according to theme for further analysis (Yin, 2018). Finally, naturalistic generalizations were developed from analyzing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The triangulation of multiple sources of data increased the construct validity of the study, and the use of multiple cases provided more detailed data (Yin, 2018). For security and privacy, all data was maintained in a secure database.

**Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this study several measures were taken to address the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study.

**Credibility**

Reflexivity will be apparent throughout the entire study. The researcher clearly stated her background. This process builds reliability because readers will understand the researchers’ experiences prior to the study. IRB approval was obtained. This ensures that the study is valid.
and significant. The study was also explained to all participants and school leadership to ensure everyone understood the study, how the study was conducted, and what methods were being utilized to ensure all persons were protected throughout the study and dissemination of data analysis (Yin, 2018). Finally, data was triangulated to provide more detailed understanding of all data collected throughout the interviews, observations, and focus groups, as well as a comprehensive knowledge of how the data supports itself (Patton, 2015).

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Member checks will be completed. The focus group leaders provided the parents of the student participants transcripts of what their child stated in order to determine if what was shared was similar to what is being perceived at home. This process builds dependability because it confirms the student’s opinions on student-teacher relationships and student motivation (Yin, 2018). Memoring was also used. Researchers recorded students’ reactions to engagement strategies teachers implement throughout the study. This process built confirmability because interactions between students and teachers were noted through direct quotes (Stake, 1995). The researcher asked outside persons to check their notes, recordings, transcripts, and analysis to demonstrate their work was dependable and can be confirmed (Tracy, 2013).

**Transferability**

The researcher used rich, dense detailed descriptions of classroom observations in order to build transferability. These descriptions will allow others to understand exactly what was taking place in the classroom at the time of the study so that they will be able to reproduce the situation in another classroom (Yin, 2018). Additionally, the researcher revealed findings that are transferable to other studies and research. Finally the research provided suggestions for
further areas of study that embrace their findings of this study while also considering how its efforts can be replicated and extended (Yin, 2018).

**Ethical Considerations**

In order to protect all participants several factors were evaluated based on their ethical considerations and then addressed. First, IRB approval was obtained from Liberty University. Second, to maintain confidentiality and privacy, all participants – students, teachers, school, and school district --were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality. Third, school personal might be unsure of the ramifications of the study and so permission was gained by the school district (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fourth, parents might not have understood the purpose of the study and how their student was included, as well as protected, throughout the study so an explanation of the study, safeguards, and permission to be a part of the study was given and required (Yin, 2018). Fifth, negative results could have impacted the school and students, therefore all participants’ names and school names were changed to pseudonyms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Sixth, all information that was collected was kept in a locked filing cabinet and electronic records were password protected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, the school, participants, and parents might be interested in the research gained and results acquired therefore all research and results have been sent to these individuals (Yin, 2018).

**Summary**

Student engagement, motivation, and achievement have been decreasing in the elementary school classroom over the last decade (Kilbourne et al., 2017). Educators, administrators, and policymakers need to understand how to address this concern in order to create a school climate and classroom culture that benefits all students. The current qualitative case study examines the connections between student-teacher relationships and student
motivation in the upper elementary classroom. The setting was a small, rural school district in southeastern Pennsylvania. 12 participants were selected utilizing criterion-based purposeful sampling. Data was collected for this collective case study in multiple ways: (a) interviews of participants, (b) classroom observations, and (c) focus groups of participants. Data analysis took place throughout the study and involved within-case and cross-case analyses of all data (Yin, 2018). Trustworthiness was established throughout the study to lend to its credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability and ethical considerations were made through the study to ensure the protection of the participants, schools, and data.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter Four begins with a brief description of each study participant, using pseudonyms. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study will be to develop an in-depth understanding of how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation within the upper elementary classroom for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students at a small, rural school in southeastern Pennsylvania. Quotations from participants are used to provide rich descriptions of the study’s research questions and support the developing themes. After the participants’ experiences are described, the results are discussed to develop themes and answer the research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Participants

The study originated with three upper elementary teachers, two who were female and one who was male. Each of these teachers have taught fourth, fifth, or sixth grade at SRES for a minimum of fifteen years. The study also featured nine upper elementary students who were students in one of the participating teachers’ classrooms. Participants for this study were determined through the use of purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used when selecting a case or cases with rich information to illuminate the question being investigated (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Pseudonyms were used for all study participants to ensure confidentiality. All quotes from participants are presented verbatim, which includes grammatical errors in speech and writing to more accurately depict participants’ voices.

Allison

Allison is a White female teacher who has 15 years of experience teaching fourth grade where she has taught all core content areas, and has specialized in English Language Arts the last
eight years. Allison was from the area and lived and taught in the same school district since graduating from college. Allison also revealed that she has lived in this area her entire life and attended the same elementary school she teaches in. She expressed her joy for being able to teach in the same school and community she was raised in, where she is raising her own children, and where she felt supported by her own teachers.

I became a teacher to make a difference in someone’s life. I love my parents, but they had their issues and throughout my life the adults that I could look towards for constant support were my teachers. I want to be an adult in my students’ lives that they know they can trust, come to for help, and will always be here for them even when they aren’t in my classroom.

Allison has taken courses in reading, special education, and behavioral therapy. Allison believed these courses have provided a framework for how to engage students through a positive student-teacher relationship.

**Lindsay**

Lindsay is a White female teacher who has 20 years of experience teaching various subjects and grade levels. Lindsay has taught in the same district since graduating from college. Lindsay stated she was drawn to this district because it reminded her of the school district she attended as an elementary student and because her mother had taught at the school district when Lindsay first began her teaching career. Lindsay continued by saying most of her teaching experience was in the upper elementary grades as a reading teacher and then a fifth grade teacher, she also taught in second grade for a number of years at the beginning of her career alongside her mother where she learned the importance of community building. Lindsay stated, “I strive to create a positive and supportive classroom environment; that’s what I put effort into,
above academics. I always make sure my students know they have a voice in our classroom and that their voice matters.” Lindsay has taken courses in school counseling and she believed these courses have provided her with significant insights into how to build community within her classroom and best practices when trying to reach a student beyond academics.

**Jonathon**

Jonathon is a White male teacher who has 25 years of experience teaching various subjects and elementary grade levels. Jonathon has dedicated his tenure in teaching to upper elementary students, where he had taught all core content subjects in the fourth grade and then specialized in teaching math and science to sixth grade students. In addition to teaching, Jonathon has 23 years of coaching experience where he had coached various sports for various age levels. Jonathon shared his love for teaching and coaching, stating how important these roles are within the life of a child. He stated:

I grew up in a single parent home. My mom worked hard every day to provide for me and my siblings. I was not the easiest kid and it seemed like the only person who could get through to me was one of my middle school teachers, who was also a coach of mine. He challenged me to be better, but also made sure I had what I needed to succeed.

**David**

David is a White male fourth grade student who has attended the same school district since he was in kindergarten, the same school district both of his parents also attended. He lives with both of his parents and his four siblings, whom he is the oldest of, in a small house near several farms. He stated, “I feel good when it’s time to head home because I get to play with my brother and sisters.” He enjoys school a lot because he loves learning about new things. David shared, “Science is my favorite class because we get to learn about the stuff around us.”
Although David does enjoy school he does get anxious while there at times. He explained, “I feel anxious at school when something unexpected happens, like a break-in. This hasn’t happened at my school, but we practice for it and I get upset during those drills.”

**Michael**

Michael is a White male fourth grade student. He has attended the same school district since he was in kindergarten. He lives with both of his parents and four siblings on their family farm where he helps do chores every day. Michael stated, “I live on a farm and it’s pretty nice. I sometimes wish I didn’t have to work on the farm. Every morning and afternoon I have chores to do around the farm and they make me really tired.” Michael thinks school is good even though he would rather be outside playing baseball, he prefers math class, but will try in all classes if he knows the teacher cares about him. Michael shared, “I try harder in the classes I like and for the teachers I like. I like a teacher if I know they like me.”

**Kara**

Kara is a Hispanic female fourth grade student. She has attended the same school district since she moved to the United States in second grade. Kara lives in a smaller home with her mom, dad, grandmother, grandfather, brother, and two sisters. Kara loves school, especially math, science, gym, and music, and really appreciates her teachers. She shared:

My favorite teacher made me feel like I mattered. She always asked how I was doing and made sure I had breakfast and lunch. She even gave me a pair of sneakers when mine got holes in them. She also came to some of the intramural sports our school had after school and on Saturdays.

**Emma**

Emma is a White female fifth grade student. Emma has attended the same school district
since kindergarten. She shared that in addition to both of her parents attending this school, her grandmother also attended this school. Her family has lived in the same house for as long as her grandmother can remember. She stated:

I live with my mom, my grandma, my pop, my step-dad, and my four siblings. My mom keeps hoping to find a house or apartment. My mom is nice, but works a lot, so she’s not home often and my step-dad is looking for a job so he’s home a lot and I think that bothers my grandmother, but he keeps saying it’s really hard to find a job because no one is hiring right now.

Emma feels at home at school and enjoys being challenged by learning new things, while being cared for by her teacher. She revealed, “Everything is really different right now because of the virus, but my teacher makes washing our hands, staying away from others, and wearing masks fun.”

Matthew

Matthew is a White male fifth grade student. Matthew has attended the same school district since kindergarten and has never moved homes. He revealed that even though his home is small and he has to share a room with his siblings he doesn’t want to move. Matthew stated, “My parents keep talking about moving, but I hope we don’t. We have noisy next door neighbors and sharing a wall with them bothers my parents, but I don’t mind it.” Matthew emphasized how he is unsure of how he feels about school, because he usually is nervous at first and then once he gets used to his new class he becomes bored. He also revealed, “Now I’m starting to like this year more. My teacher has been doing a lot of fun projects.”

Jacob

Jacob is a Black male fifth grade student. Jacob has attended the same school district
since kindergarten, as did both of his parents. He emphasized how much he doesn’t like school, but he hates this school year due to having to start school remotely. Jacob stated, “Right this very moment, I feel anger. I hate remote learning. School makes me feel irritated, I can’t wait to be able to come to school again in person.” Jacob revealed that even though he hates school he has had some nice teachers who really cared about him. He stated:

My teacher actually cares about me and the fact that I hate school. She doesn’t yell at me, she is always calm. At home I get yelled at a lot, but my teacher never raises their voice. She even dropped stuff off at my house that I needed for remote learning.

Andrew

Andrew is a White male sixth grade student. Andrew has attended this school district since the third grade. He moved to this school district after his parents’ divorce. He shared, “I think it’s amazing because we’re lucky enough to have somewhere to stay. It’s also pretty warm and our fridge actually works.” Andrew shared that school is kind of boring, but also kind of fun. He does not enjoy remote learning, but knows his teachers are doing their best. He also believes it’s important to know if his teachers care about him. He stated, “Yeah, because I will always know they are there for me and will help.”

Jessica

Jessica is a multi-race female sixth grade student. Jessica first attended SRES during part of her first grade year and then returned to the school at the beginning of her fourth grade year, where she has remained. Jessica now lives with her grandparents. She stated:

My home is small, but full of love. I am happy there because my grandparents are the best and they make sure my sisters and I are safe. We always have food and heat too.
When we lived with my mom we always had to wear three layers of clothes and never had food. I used to be scared all the time, but now I’m not, I’m just happy. Jessica loves school, not only because she enjoys learning, but also because she feels safe and provided for while at school. She revealed, “My school is another place I feel safe. I get food here, it’s always warm, and I get to learn things that will help me later in life at least that is what my grandma always says.”

Carly

Carly is a White sixth grade student. Carly has attended the same school district since kindergarten. Both of Carly’s parents also attended this school district. Carly lives with her parents and three siblings in a smaller home. She shared, “Sometimes we get along and sometimes we fight a lot. My siblings and I mostly fight over space, food, and cleaning up. My parents don’t yell a lot, but when they do they mean business.” Carly emphasized how every year she feels anxious at the beginning of the year because she is unsure of what to expect and doesn’t like change, so this year was extra difficult for her. However, now she feels happy at school and is starting to enjoy her classes. Carly discussed her favorite teacher and importance of knowing that her teachers actually care about her. She stated, “I think it’s important to know if teachers care about you so I don’t get sad during the day, depressed even, because at least I know that one person cares about me.”

Results

The results of this study were derived from categories that developed as data was analyzed based on repeated phrases that became codes where categories emerged from the codes. The codes were identified during data analysis by noting the repetition of key words through
highlighting. After recognizing the codes, categories were identified where themes emerged from the categories.

**Theme Development**

This research was conducted using three methods of data collections: surveys, interviews, and a focus group. The interviews and focus group were recorded, then transcribed by the researcher, and finally member checked for accuracy. The survey answers, interview transcripts, and focus group transcripts were then read and reread for common categories or themes. After repeated analysis, 30 codes were identified to describe the data in the surveys responses, in the interview transcripts, and in the focus group transcripts (see Table 1). After analysis of each of the codes was conducted, a number of themes were able to be identified. Similarities between themes were noted and finally, themes were analyzed for commonalities and differentiating elements between each theme. The common themes found among participants were influence of home environment, importance of school environment, impact of classroom environment, significance of teacher, and external factors impacting student motivation.

Table 1

**Codes and Themes**

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<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Repetition of Information</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Influence of Home Environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>#2 Negative Qualities</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Unmet Needs</td>
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</tr>
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<td>#4 Student Responsibilities</td>
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<td>#5 Student Concerns</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Negative Feelings</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
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</tr>
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<td>#13</td>
<td>Suggestions for Improvement</td>
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<td>Impact on Students</td>
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<td>#26</td>
<td>Personal Motivation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Importance of School Environment
- Impact of Classroom Environment
- Significance of Teacher
# Theme 1: Influence of Home Environment

This theme focused on the influence a student’s home environment has on all aspects of a student’s life, both at home and at school. This theme determined a student’s home environment is the foundation for their mental and physical well-being which directly connects to their ability to perform in the classroom. David, Michael, Kara, Jacob, and Matthew all shared the common theme of positive qualities and positive feelings towards their home environment, expressing how important their family was to them and that even though they might have a smaller home, little yard, or have to complete chores each day, they felt safe, cared for, and loved at home.

David shared, “I live with my mom and dad, brother, and three sisters. They are very nice. My baby sister is my favorite because she loves to follow me around and I like making her laugh.” Michael also had good feelings about his family and home environment. He stated, “I live on a farm and it’s pretty nice. I like living in the country. I feel good at my house.” Kara also feels good at her home even though it is rather small and full of family members. She revealed, “I live with my mom, my dad, my grandfather, my grandmother, sister, and brothers. Some of them are loud, some are quiet, but everyone gets along. I feel good at home.” Jacob shared that even though his house is small he feels good there with his family. He shared, “My house is good, but kind of small. I have a good backyard so I can go outside and climb trees or play with my animals. My family is good, for the most part, we all get along.” Matthew also spoke highly of his home. He stated:
I like my home. It’s kind of small, but I like it. My parents keep talking about moving, but I hope we don’t. We have noisy neighbors and sharing a wall with them bothers my parents, but I don’t mind it. I feel good at my house, because I get to play with my brothers and sister there. My family is pretty awesome. I really like my family, they are fun to be with.

Emma, Andrew, Jessica, and Carly all shared the common theme of negative qualities and negative feelings towards their home environment, expressing how they often felt unsafe, unwelcome, or in need of something while at home. Emma revealed that even though her grandmother does a lot for her and her family, she has great responsibilities because her mom is often working, her step-dad is out of work, and her family is in prison. Emma stated:

I live with my mom, my grandma, my pop, my stepdad, and my 4 siblings. My mom is nice, but works a lot, so she's not home often. My step-dad is looking for a job so he's home a lot unless he's out looking for a job. He says it's hard though because no one is hiring right now. My grandma is great, she makes sure we get on the bus and eat dinner, but she's also pretty strict. My older brother is nice to me, but can be mean at school. He gets in a lot of trouble. My younger sisters are pretty loud and always into something. I'm the quiet one in the family, I try to help my mom and grandma as much as I can.

Andrew shared how lucky he is to have somewhere to live right now. He stated, “I live in a small apartment with two rooms, my mom gets one room and my brothers and I get the other. I think it’s amazing because we're lucky enough to have a somewhere to stay. It's also pretty warm and our fridge actually works.” Jessica acknowledged past traumas in her life, revealing that even though now she is in a safe environment that was not always the case. She stated:
My home is small, but full of love. I am happy there because my grandparents are the best and they make sure my sisters and I are safe. We always have food and heat too. When we lived with my mom we always had to wear three layers of clothes and never had food. I used to be scared all the time, but now I'm not, I'm just happy. I live with my grandparents and two sisters. My two younger siblings live with my aunt. Even though my siblings can be a bit annoying they're my favorite people in the world. My mom died of an overdose two years ago and I miss her every day, but I don't miss where I used to live or who used to be around us all the time. I love where I live now because we're safe.

Carly shared her home is small and often messy, but she does feel safe there even though she is often fighting with her siblings. Carly stated, “I live with my three siblings and two parents and it is not easy. Sometimes we get along and sometimes we fight a lot. My siblings and I mostly fight over space, food, and cleaning up. My parents don't yell a lot, but when they do they mean business so you better do as they say.”

**Theme #2: Importance of School Environment**

This theme focused on the importance of a student’s school environment and how it can impact a student’s experience at school, often manifesting in their level of engagement within the school community and feelings of belongingness and safety. This theme determined a student’s school environment has the ability to establish the groundwork needed for school staff to positively engage with and assist students by meeting their unmet basic, physiological needs. David, Kara, Emma, Matthew, Jacob, Jessica, and Carly all shared the common theme of positive qualities and positive feelings towards their school environment, expressing how, even though their school was small and among several farms they felt happy, safe, and accepted at their school.
David stated, “Our school is very friendly, most everyone smiles at each other.” Kara echoed David’s sentiment by sharing, “I feel happy and excited when I am heading to school. I really like school, my teachers, and principal.” Emma also demonstrated her feelings of happiness and acceptance in her school environment. She stated:

I really like my school. I feel safe there and I have a lot of fun when I’m at school. Even though we are remote right now I still really like school. My teacher tries to make remote learning a lot of fun and the principal even allowed us to create an announcement club so it feels like we are all together even when we are apart. No matter if we are in person or virtual we do a lot of small groups where we get to talk a lot and share what we are thinking. I’ve made some new friends this year and think it’s because our teacher trusts us in small groups.

Matthew shared that even though the school is small, it is clean and he feels comfortable there. Matthew said, “My school is cool. I feel good when I am there. Even though the building is only two floors and kind of small I like that everything looks clean and I know where everything is.” Jacob also voiced that he likes attending a small school where teachers allow students from different classes to work together and that he feels accepted by everyone at his school. Jacob stated, “I like how fifth grade gets the top floor to themselves, our teacher lets us work in the hallway, and we even get to work with kids from other classes. It’s really cool, I now have more friends I can talk to.” Jessica continued the idea of acceptance and the welcome nature of her school and the school’s ability to meet her unmet needs. She stated:

My school is another place I feel safe. I get food here, it’s always warm, and I get to learn things that will help me later in life, at least that’s what my grandma always says. I feel happy at school because my teacher, who had both of my older sisters, knows my
family really well and knows all about my life so they never ask awkward questions, they just make sure I’m happy and fed. Plus, I get to see my friends which is awesome.

Carly also likes coming to school because she feels accepted at school and can be herself.

Carly shared, “I feel different at school. I can do my own thing and not have to think about my siblings or what they think of me.”

Both Allison and Jonathon discussed the importance of the school environment and how it can impact students and teachers alike. Allison stated, “I agree with the kids, this year has been different, but everyone is doing their very best. I like how most everyone is smiling. Everyone’s willingness to work together and try new things has been uplifting.” Jonathon added, “Yeah, this year has been tough but I think for the most part everyone is trying their best. I think we have come a long way in our current situation to build community during both remote and in-person.”

Michael and Andrew shared the common theme of negative qualities and negative feelings towards their school environment, expressing how they often felt unwelcome and misunderstood. Michael stated:

My school is very small and everyone seems to know everyone, but no one usually talks to me. I wish kids would talk to me even if the teacher didn’t ask them to include me in things. I don’t think she realizes, but I know she asks a couple kids to play with me at recess or let me be in their group during projects.

Similarly Andrew shared, “Sometimes kids can be mean to each other and I get annoyed a lot. I get frustrated when I don’t understand something and teachers don’t understand what I am trying to say.”
Theme #3: Impact of Classroom Environment

This theme focused on the impact a student’s classroom environment has on the student’s social, emotional, and mental well-being. This theme determined a student’s classroom environment has the ability to allow students to feel safe and welcome. The classroom environment is established by the teacher, but cultivated by every individual that walks through the classroom door. The classroom environment is directly impacted not only by the adults working within the classroom, such as the teacher and classroom aides, but also by the students within the classroom and how they interact their peers, participate within the classroom, and navigate the classroom procedures and expectations. David, Michael, Kara, Emma, Matthew, Jacob, Jessica, and Carly all shared the common theme of positive qualities and positive feelings towards their classroom environment, expressing how they feel comfortable, happy, and often excited to be in their classroom which has increased their success in the classroom socially and academically.

David shared, “My classroom is nice, welcoming, and friendly.” Michael agreed with David saying, “I feel comfortable in my classroom. My teacher is nice and most of the kids in my class are nice too.” Kara stated, “I feel happy, excited, and safe when I go into my classroom.” Emma said, “I feel included in my classroom.” Matthew reiterated these ideas saying, “My classroom is a happy, safe place. I always feel a part of the group there.” Jacob agreed when he shared, “I’m glad to be a part of this class, I think ours might be the most fun in the grade. Our class is loud, but a good loud. Everyone talks to everyone and no one is left out.” Jessica stated:

My classroom is loud too, well we’re loud when we’re allowed to be and working quietly when that’s what we’re supposed to be doing. Everyone gets along even if we get
annoyed with each other sometimes. My teacher really tries to get us to talk to each other if we disagree with someone and try to understand how the other person might feel. I’ve learned that being a part of our classroom community means listening to others when you don’t want to and helping everyone even if they aren’t your best friend.

Carly also shared she feels happy when entering her classroom and about the role her teacher takes in creating a caring classroom environment. Carly stated, “I feel happy in my classroom because my teacher is nice and kind. He really seems excited to see me and care about how I am doing in class. I think he really cares about all of us and makes our classroom fun.”

Allison, Lindsay and Jonathon reiterated the importance of cultivating a classroom community and environment where all students feel welcome, included and safe in order to provide the best learning environment where students’ social and emotional needs are met as best as possible within the regular education classroom. Allison stated:

Classroom culture involves creating an environment where students feel safe and free to be involved. It's a space where everyone should feel accepted and included in everything. Students should be comfortable with sharing how they feel, and teachers should be willing to take it in to help improve learning. I purposely have students work with different students on a daily basis. I have a classroom pledge that we begin everyday with. We hold classroom meetings so that students feel safe sharing their feelings or thoughts. We read stories about having a positive/growth mindset and what it means to have grit.

Lindsay said, “I try to build a base foundation with my students so everyone feels safe in my classroom. Then I really try to focus on those students who seem to be struggling and make sure they have made connections with several peers in our class.” Jonathon stated:
My classroom is structured chaos. I am intentionally going for a relaxed atmosphere where kids can talk as long as they are working and respectful. I have found that in this environment kids are more willing to talk to me about anything and that helps them become more comfortable coming to me about big issues.

Conversely, a student’s classroom environment as the ability to create additional barriers for students when they do not feel included in and a part of the classroom community. Andrew shared negative feelings towards his classroom environment, expressing at times he feels anxious in his classroom. Andrew stated, “I feel fine sometimes when I go into my class and other times I feel nervous. I guess it just depends on how I feel on the bus.”

**Theme #4: Significance of Teacher**

This theme focused on the significance of the teacher and how students will engage more within a classroom where they feel accepted by and cared for by their teacher. This theme determined students recognize the intentional acts of their teachers and identify them as caring qualities that signify their teachers understand their outside needs and will do almost anything to help them. Teachers’ intentional acts are not limited to the classroom, these acts also include all interactions teachers have with their students in the school building, throughout the school day, within the community, and when conversing with the student and their families. David, Michael, Kara, Emma, Matthew, Jacob, Andrew, Jessica, and Carly all shared the common theme of caring teachers who help them with academics, as well as other needs; making them feel cared for, heard, safe, and accepted. David stated:

I like my teacher a lot. She is always smiling and very nice. I like that she makes sure that everyone in my class feels comfortable. She has even taken things to kids’ houses if
they needed it, my friend told me she showed up at his house to give him and his mom something.

Michael shared, “My teacher really cares, she always seems to remember things I tell her.” Kara echoed Michael’s thoughts saying, “My teacher seems to actually want to get to know me and really seems to listen when I am talking.” Matthew also stated he likes talking with the teacher because it makes him feel more comfortable in class. Matthew said, “My teacher is kind, nice, caring. She asks me about what I like and tells funny stories, it make me feel more relaxed in class.” Emma shared how her teacher is always looking out for her well-being. Emma stated, “My teacher makes sure I eat breakfast every morning.” Jacob also shared, “My teacher doesn’t make me feel bad when I don’t have something I need for school, like a pencil or markers, she just gave me some from her desk.” Andrew continued the idea of teachers caring for students well-being when he stated, “My teacher made sure I had a winter coat, hat, and gloves.” Jessica shared, “My teacher has helped me and my classmates in a lot of ways. Sometimes it’s with school supplies and answering our questions during class, and sometimes it’s with food or things you might need at home.” Carly stated:

My teacher really cares about me. He always ask about our lives outside of school, like about sports or what we did over the weekend. He also is willing to help me with anything I ask. I never feel stupid or unimportant in my class.

Allison, Lindsay, and Jonathon also recognized the significance teachers have on their students, revealing that teachers have the ability to not only educate their students, but provide for the social, emotional, and mental well-being through small, intentional acts. Allison, Lindsay, and Jonathon also determined that it is very challenging to meet all of the unmet
physiological needs of their students, but are able to meet some of their needs in the classroom and with the help of other school staff. Allison stated:

It is very important to address social and emotional needs in my classroom. I don’t always feel like I have time to do this, but I have learned that if I don’t make the time my students will shut down before any of my lessons even begin. I focus on their social and emotional needs by having open communication with my whole class and individual students. I also try to read books with different scenarios the characters are facing and discuss how we can apply these lessons to real life. I also try to have open, frequent communication with the parents to figure out what is going on within the student’s life.

Lindsay shared some of the intentional acts she does on a daily basis in order to meet her students where they are, hoping to build foundations that will have a lasting impact on her students. She stated:

I try and use humor a lot with my students, to lighten things like behavior issues so it can then translate into positive behaviors. I try to greet every student by name. I also pull students aside to share in accomplishments, point out positives, and debrief with students when their actions or the actions of others lead to misbehaviors in the classroom.

Jonathon discussed how he meets students’ needs in the classroom, while also using resources the school provides to meet larger needs. Jonathon revealed:

I check in with kids through our character education lessons and small group discussions and one on one conversations. If I don’t take time to do this, they won’t learn. We need to focus on emotions first, then academics. The school provides breakfast and lunch for all students, if they want it. The guidance counselor can get clothes when they are needed. We also hand out community resource forms often to our students so families know
where they can get help within the community. Teachers also provide food to kids and go to the right channels, like the guidance counselor, to get help. I have seen over the years that kids go to teachers they trust when they really need serious help.

**Theme #5: External Factors Impacting Student Motivation**

This theme focused on the factors that positively and negatively impact student motivation within the classroom. This theme determined a student’s home environment, support system, both at home and in school, as well as their school climate, classroom culture, and the student-teacher relationship can all positively and negatively impact a student’s ability to perform in the classroom. David, Michael, and Emma all shared the common theme of student-teacher relationships that lead to trust and feelings of comfort. David stated, “I like knowing a teacher cares about me because then I can trust them to take care of me during the school day and I know I can ask them for help when I need it. If I don’t trust the teacher I won’t say much in class.” Michael shared, “I try harder in the classes I like and for the teacher I like, who make me feel like I can trust them.” Emma said, “Knowing a teacher cares about me matters because then I feel comfortable around them and know I can trust them.”

Kara, Jacob, Jessica, and Carly all shared the common theme of student-teacher relationships that provided support for unmet physiological and emotional needs. Kara stated:

My favorite teacher makes me feel like I matter. She always asked me how I was doing and made sure I had food for breakfast and lunch. She even gave me a pair of sneakers when mine got holes in them. Jacob discussed the qualities of his favorite teacher, reiterating their ability to make him feel accepted and cared for. He shared:
They were so nice. They actually cared about me and the fact that I hate school. They didn’t yell at me, they were calm. At home I get yelled at a lot, but this teacher never raised their voice. They even dropped stuff off at my house that I needed for remote learning.

Jessica echoed Jacob, stating, “My teacher talks to me like I matter. She asks if I ate breakfast and if I haven’t she always finds me food. She asks me questions about my life and she really wants to know the answers.” Carly demonstrated the need for a positive student-teacher relationship, stating how much it matters to her mental well-being. She said, “It’s important to me to know if my teachers care about me so I don’t get sad during the day, depressed even, because at least I know that one person cares about me.”

Matthew and Andrew revealed they often think school is boring and will not work in a classroom where they think the teacher doesn’t like them or already has a bad opinion of them. Matthew sharing, “When I think my teacher doesn’t like me I usually won’t talk to them or want to answer their questions.” Andrew affirmed that belief, stating:

Yeah, how your teacher looks at you is huge. If a teacher looks at me like they don’t care or think I’m going to cause trouble it makes me want to do something to prove to them I can be a pain and they shouldn’t have judged me.

Allison, Lindsay, and Jonathon all shared the common theme of student support systems, both in and out of school, contribute greatly to a student’s motivation within the classroom. Allison shared, “Outside needs definitely affect student motivation in the classroom, like food, because if they don’t have basic needs met they aren’t ready to learn.” Lindsay expanded on that idea and stated:
Economic status of the family plays a bigger part on student motivation than it did in the past. I’ve had poor kids who used to try really hard, now it is almost like a sentence for these kids. It now seems to be a connection between the kids and their academic motivation.

Jonathon revealed, “Home life is a big contributor too. It all depends on what happens the night and morning before a student walks into my classroom. If they were fed, slept well, wasn’t yelled at then they usually put forth effort.”

**Answer to Research Questions**

The following section provides answers to the central question and three guiding questions introduced in Chapter Three of this study. These responses were developed based on the data collected. Direct quotations from participants collected in surveys, interviews, and the focus group are included in the response. These answers provide specific responses to the research questions to nullify any uncertainty.

**Central Question:**

How are student-teacher relationships connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom? Participants shared their perceptions of how student-teacher relationships impact student motivation in the upper elementary classroom.

David shared during his interview how he often feels anxious at school due to the drills he has had to practice since he was a kindergarten. He is worried that someone might come in and try to hurt him or his class, he says he is always making sure doors are shut and locked. He also shared that he feels better when he knows he can trust his teacher, if he thinks they can keep him safe, and can ask questions without the teacher getting mad at him. He reiterated the idea that his favorite teacher always made him feel safe which helped him to pay attention more during class
and really liked that she let him ask any question he had which made him feel comfortable to try different things in class. David stated:

The student-teacher relationship is important to me because then I can trust them to take care of me during the school day and I know I can ask them for help when I need it. If I don't trust the teacher I won't say much in class.

This narrative briefly describes how much trust means to David and impacts his ability to perform in the classroom.

Michael shared during his interview that he thinks school is ok and he feels fine when entering his school building and classroom. He continued by explaining how he prefers math over other subjects, but recognizes how hard some of his teachers have worked to make school fun with different projects and by trying to get to know him as a person. Michael did not voice the importance of the student-teacher relationship and how it impacts student motivation, but he did say, “I try harder in the classes I like and for the teachers I like. I like a teacher if I know they like me.”

Kara on the other hand demonstrated during the focus group that she understood what a student-teacher relationship was, as well as the importance of having one with her teachers. Kara stated:

Yeah, the student-teacher relationship is super important. I think kids work more when they think what they are learning is important, like when teachers explain to us why what we are learning will help us in the future, and will work hard if they know their teacher will help them out with tough lessons and projects.
Based on this statement, Kara believed student-teacher relationships impacted her learning and motivation in the classroom, revealing that she works harder for teachers she knows will help her.

Emma built off of Kara’s idea of the importance and impact of student-teacher relationships within the classroom during the focus group, as she explained how these relationships also affect the classroom climate and culture. Emma shared, “The relationship between the teacher and their students affects how everyone interacts with each other.” Emma believed that student-teacher relationships have the ability to impact more than just one student at time, they can alter an entire classroom.

Matthew also shared during the focus group that in order for him to really participate in his classroom he needs to feel comfortable. Matthew stated, “If I don't feel comfortable with my teacher I won't say much in that class.” Matthew also recognized during the focus group that if he does not say much in class he does not usually understand what is being taught as well and gets lost during independent work time.

Jacob agreed with Matthew during the focus group and expanded on the idea that if the student-teacher relationship is negative or nonexistent, students will not perform in that classroom. Jacob stated:

When I think my teacher doesn't like me I usually won’t talk to them or want to answer their questions, so I think the student-teacher relationship is very important. Everyone can tell when a teacher cares about their students and when they don't. Kids act differently in a classroom where they get along with their teacher and where they aren't sure of their teacher.
This narrative briefly describes how Jacob viewed student-teacher relationships, how students are able to recognize when their teacher cares for them, and the reactions students have in their classrooms based on their relationship with their teacher.

Andrew agreed with Jacob during the focus group. He shared he does not work for and often does not listen to teachers he does not have a relationships with. Andrew said, “I agree, if I don't think a teacher cares about me or is willing to help me I kind of just tune them out.” Jessica expanded upon Andrew’s idea during the focus group. She evaluated the importance of the student-teacher relationship and how it can benefit the student’s emotional state within the classroom. Jessica stated:

It is a good idea to try and have a good relationship with your teacher because it will make you feel more comfortable in their class and that will help you learn because you will be more willing to ask them questions and for help.

Based on this statement Jessica is advocating for student-teacher relationships that allow students to feel comfortable in their classroom so they can ask questions which will lead to increased learning and motivation in the classroom.

Carly dissected how she knows if a teacher cares about her and revealed she likes coming to school because she believed her teacher wanted her there. Carly stated:

I know a teacher cares about me if they help me out, ask how my day is going, and make me feel like I matter and that if I wasn't in their class they would miss me. I actually want to come to school this year because I think my teacher really wants me there.

This narrative briefly describes how Carly’s relationship with her teacher changed her opinion of school which directly impacted her performance in the classroom simply because she now wanted to go to school.
As an elementary teacher, Allison has had 15 years of experience teaching upper elementary students. During this time Allison has realized not all students come to school ready to learn and that students need a student-teacher relationship where they feel seen, heard, and cared for in order to even begin the learning process. During her interview Allison stated:

The student-teacher relationship is necessary more so now than ever before. More students are entering our classrooms with baggage that we rarely thought children would have to deal with at such a young age and in order for us to reach those students and meet them where they are we need to know what they are facing so we can figure out what they need to feel comfortable at school and in our classrooms so they are open to learning.

Based on Allison’s statement, students are coming to school with additional needs that teachers need to address before academics can begin. Allison also shared, “Students need to trust you in order to walk into your classroom everyday open to hearing what you have to say about life and academics. If students trust you, you really can help them succeed in life.” Allison revealed that once she built a relationship with her students they began to trust her more and she was able to meet more of their needs which lead to more engagement in her classroom.

Lindsay has 20 years of experience in the elementary classroom. She has taught second grade, fifth grade, and as a reading teacher. Throughout her tenure Lindsay has realized the key to a successful classroom is the student-teacher relationship. Lindsay shared during her interview:

The student-teacher relationship is vital. The role it takes in the classroom is the key to any success you as a teacher might have with that student. If you don't make a point to build a relationship with your student you might be able to teach them a couple things
from the curriculum, but you will never fully educate or meet the needs of the whole child. I guess you have to decide as a teacher what is the most important thing to you in your classroom? Curriculum or children.

This narrative briefly explained how Lindsay views the necessity of the student-teacher relationship and the importance of meeting the needs of the whole child before tackling the curriculum. Lindsay believed that any success a teacher has with a student is directly tied to the relationship the teacher has with the student. Lindsay also stated:

The student-teacher relationship is the most important thing in the room. You can’t be friends with your students, but you need to build community so they respect you and they know you respect them. They need to know you value them and that you want the best for them. That translates a lot into their behavior too. If they don’t think you respect them they are done with you and your class.

Based on Lindsay’s statement, the student-teacher relationship is necessary if any respect is to be shown in the classroom and for increased positive student behavior. She argued that when students respect their teacher, they behave more in the classroom, actively participate in lessons, and increase their understanding of academic lessons.

Jonathon agreed with Lindsay on the premise that the student-teacher relationship is necessary above all else if students are to be motivated in the classroom. Jonathon stated:

The student-teacher relationship is the first thing that needs to happen as soon as students enter the classroom if you ever want your students to respect you, listen to you, and be willing to put in the work that is needed to grow as a person and learner.

Based on Jonathon’s statement, students will respect, listen to, and work for teachers they have a positive relationship with. Jonathon believed student motivation can increase and decrease based
on the relationship a student has with their teacher. Jonathon said, “Teachers’ attitude matter a lot too when it comes to student motivation. If a student knows a teacher doesn’t care about them or respect them then that student isn’t going to try in that classroom.” He argued that all teachers should consider what type of relationship they have with their students and if they are creating a classroom climate where all students can and want to learn. Jonathon also stated during his interview:

On a scale 1-10, the student-teacher relationship is an 11. If the kids know you care about them they will work for you. If they don’t think you care about them they won’t be as engaged. You need to build student-teacher relationships because you’re like their parent at school.

This narrative briefly described how Jonathon viewed student-teacher relationships and their ability to impact student engagement in the classroom. If students recognize you care for them they will increase their participation in class and their motivation level will rise.

*Guiding Question 1:*

What affect does unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs have on students in the classroom? Allison shared that many of her students are entering her classroom with increasing needs. When she first started teaching she might have one or two students coming to school hungry, however, over the last five years she has realized that around half of class qualify for the free and reduced lunch program. Additionally, she stated more students are coming to school in old, dirty clothes that often do not fit them, have holes, and are not suitable for the weather. She revealed that students who enter her classroom with unmet needs are often unable to participate in class, like their peers who enter the classroom with all of their basic needs met, because these students often seem worried, preoccupied, or unable to focus on what is
taking place in the classroom. During her interview Allison stated:

Students come from various backgrounds and living conditions. There are several outside factors that impact student achievement and motivation, the top three that have affected my students over the last several years are: home life, support system, and access to materials.

This narrative briefly describes the factors that Allison viewed as having the ability to positively and negatively impact her students. Allison argued that more and more students are coming to school with less and less: less stability in their homes, less support from their family, and less material things necessary to thrive all due to increased demands put on the family unit.

Allison explained that students who often come to school with unmet needs are usually unable or unwilling to participate fully in the classroom. During the focus group Allison shared, “I think student motivation is related to how a student is feeling that day, if they are tired or hungry or are in the right mindset to learn” (Focus Group, October 30, 2020). Allison believed unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs do have an impact on student motivation in the classroom and unless these needs are addressed they will continue to hinder student achievement, engagement, and motivation in the classroom.

Lindsay shared similar thoughts as Allison during her interview. She explained that over her 20 year teaching career she has seen student motivation decrease greatly. Lindsay attributes decreased student motivation to student upbringing, support received by students, and financial safety of families. Lindsay stated:

Students are very divided. Some are highly motivated, high achieving and/or hard working, secure family relationships. Some are already disillusioned with the school system, lack support at home. Those that have economic security usually do well. Those
that don’t seem to do well if they have parents who prioritize academics.

Based on Lindsay’s statement, unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs have a negative impact on students in the classroom. Students who are performing in the classroom often come from families who can provide for students’ financial, physical, and emotional needs. Students experiencing instability in their homes are not doing as well in the classroom and Lindsay believed this was due to parents not putting academics as a priority and students needing continued support in all areas of their lives. Lindsay also shared she understood the challenges parents face and realized that if food or academics were of concern, she too would focus on feeding her children rather than pushing school work.

Jonathon also remarked on the change he has seen throughout his teaching career in the family structure and noted how these shifts have impacted students on several levels during his interview. Jonathon stated:

During my time at this school district I have seen a shift from the traditional family make-up of two parents and children living at home, to a high rate of single parent families. In recent years more parents are working two jobs to maintain house hold income which means students are coming home alone. I've also noticed several second and third shift working parents. Transient students from bordering districts to ours and back again are more common and more students are being raised by their grandparents. This narrative briefly explains Jonathon’s views on the impact the shifting family unit has had on students. He believed these changes have led to increased unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs of students which have negatively contributed to a student’s ability to perform in the classroom. Jonathon shared, “It all depends on what happens the night and morning before a student walks into my classroom. If they were fed, slept well, wasn’t yelled at
then they usually put forth effort.” How a student enters the classroom greatly impacts how they will contribute to their classroom for that day. Jonathon revealed that if a student enters the classroom with all of their basic needs met then they will mostly likely participate and be motivated to learn, however, if they enter with any of their needs unmet the student will continue to struggle until their needs are addressed.

**Guiding Question 2:**

How are teachers meeting the unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs of their students? Participants shared their perceptions of how teachers try to address any unmet needs of their students. David stated he was a lucky kid who had a really nice family that took care of him. He acknowledged that there were kids in his class that seemed to not have the same things as him. He was concerned about those kids and asked how his teacher knew who needed some extra help. He stated she must know because she has given a couple things to these kids already. In his survey, David stated:

My teachers makes sure everyone in my class feels comfortable and safe. She even has taken things to kids’ houses if they haven't had something they needed. My friend told me she just showed up one afternoon with a bag of things for his family.

Daniel continued this thought during his interview when he shared:

My teacher has given things to a couple kids in our class that needed them, like a pencil or snack, without making a big deal about it. She also brought in a birthday treat for a kid whose mom didn’t send something in.

These narratives briefly describe how Daniel viewed his teacher and her actions, trying to help his classmates in need. He expressed gratitude for his teacher and her willingness to help these
students, because he was worried about them and who would make sure they had what they needed.

Unlike David, Michael did not discuss whether or not he had witnesses his teaching providing for his or his peers physical needs, but he did mention that he appreciated his teacher’s ability to make him feel a part of the classroom and someone that mattered. Michael said during his interview, “She remembered things I told her and would ask about my life.” He reiterated how this made him feel special and make him want to come to school.

Kara echoed what both David and Michael discussed. She revealed that her teacher has provided for both her physical needs and emotional needs. During her interview Kara stated:

My teacher always asked me how I was doing and made sure I had food for breakfast and lunch. She even gave me a pair of sneakers when mine got holes in them. She even came to some of my sports games.

Based on Kara’s statement, her teacher was able to meet several of her unmet needs by first recognizing the needs, then making a point to create a relationship with her through positive interactions within the classroom and on the sports field, and finally by giving her something she greatly needed.

Emma shared similar experiences as Kara. She discussed what makes her feel anxious at school and revealed how her teacher helps her every day with those anxieties. During her interview she stated:

Everything is really different right now because of the virus and it makes me really upset. I worry a lot about things, but my teacher makes washing our hands, staying away from others, and wearing masks fun. She tells us how important it is, but doesn’t make it seem awful when I forget to do something. I also really like how she just seems to know when
something is wrong with us or if we need help. She'll quietly come over to you and talk to you until she helps you figure out how to handle your problem. She really cares about me and everyone in our class.

This narrative briefly describes how Emma feels in her classroom and how her teacher is able to help her emotional needs through a caring relationship that does not place blame on the student. Emma appreciated the way her teacher approached the pandemic, as well as other needs of herself and her classmates. Her teacher addressed these needs, but unobtrusively in a way that doesn’t draw attention.

Jacob expressed during his interview how he is used to a lot of yelling at his house and his mom not having a lot of time for him. When asked about his teacher he stated:

I like how my teacher doesn’t yell at me, she asks me about my day, if I need help, and then she actually makes time to help me. She even dropped stuff off at my house that I needed for remote learning. My teacher is really funny and I really like her. She is calm and laid back. She lets stuff go that other adults wouldn't. I like that she doesn't yell at us over little things. She comes up to me to whisper something to me that I need to do or stop doing and I like that because no one knows what she is telling me and I don't get in trouble as much as I used to. I think she likes me.

Based on Jacob’s statement, Jacob’s teacher is able to provide for some of his physical and emotional needs through her understanding of how he functions and what he would benefit from. Jacob expressed that his teacher really knew him and liked how she didn’t make him feel different from the other kids.

Unlike the other students, during his interview Andrew discussed his personal care assistant and how she has been able to meet his needs. Andrew stated:
I don’t like school very much to be honest. The actual building is nice. The doors work and the building is always warm. But I hate school because I always feel agitated, but I have Ms. Tracy and she is amazing. Ms. Tracy has been my aide for three years now and I am lucky to have her. She helps me calm down when I can't do it on my own. I guess school is not the worst place to be if Ms. Tracy is there to help me.

This narrative briefly describes how Andrew does not feel connected to his school or classroom community and that when he feels frustrated, which is most of the time, the only person who can help him is his personal care assistant. He reiterated during his interview how important she is to him and that without her he would not make it through his school day. Andrew revealed that things are hard at home because his father left and his mom has to work extra hard, and so he just is annoyed at school all the time, thinking about his life. However, he is able to attend in some of his lessons because his personal care assistant talks to him and helps him process his feelings.

Jessica shared during her interview that she has moved around a lot, that her parents were heavily involved in drugs, and that her grandparents have tried their best to make sure her and her siblings were safe. She is now living full time with her grandparents since her mom’s death and dad’s imprisonment. Jessica shared she often feels nervous in a new situation and is hesitant to get to know people, however, she said she feels very comfortable with her teacher. Jessica stated:

I feel happy at school because my teacher, who had both of my older sisters, knows my family really well and knows all about my life so they never ask awkward questions, they just make sure I'm happy and fed.

Based on Jessica’s statement, her teacher provides for her by allowing her to just be herself without asking intrusive questions and by ensuring she has had her physical needs met. Jessica
concluded her interview by sharing how lucky she feels to have a teacher who is genuine and caring.

Carly shared during her interview about a teacher who cared and met her needs by making her feel important, asking questions about her, and providing for her when asked. She said:

She always asked how we were and about what we did outside of school. She also was willing to help me with anything I asked, whether it was school related or not. She also never made me feel stupid or unimportant.

Carly’s social and emotional needs were met by her teacher being present, helping when necessary, and making sure Carly knew she mattered.

Allison shared during her interview that she has had many students in her classroom throughout her tenure that have come to school with several unmet needs. She discussed how she would try to help these students as much as she could and when her help was not sufficient she would enlist the help of other staff members. Allison reiterated that one person is not able to meet all of the needs of these students, but as a collective the school and the surrounding community can provide much needed support. Allison stated:

If I suspect someone is not getting food I will contact the guidance counselor who will reach out to the family to see if they need to sign up for the free and reduced meal program. I always have a secret cabinet of food for kids so that when they enter the classroom they know they can just go to that cabinet and get food. I also have extra clothing for them. Our school does a lot of food drives which we then donate to the food cupboard in town. When there are bigger concerns I talk with the guidance counselor who either addresses it herself or connects the family with outside agencies who can help.
In addition to making sure her students had their physical needs met Allison also focused on their social and emotional needs. Allison stated:

It is very important to address social and emotional needs in my classroom. I don’t always feel like I have time to do this, but I have learned that if I don’t make the time my students will shut down before any of my lessons even begin. I focus on their social and emotional needs by having open communication with my whole class and individual students. I also try to read books with different scenarios the characters are facing and discuss how we can apply these lessons to real life. I also try to have open, frequent communication with the parents to figure out what is going on within the student’s life.

Based on Allison’s statement, the social and emotional well-being of students is just as important as their physical and physiological needs, however, these are often more difficult to address. Allison was able to meet these needs through positive interactions with herself and the student, the use of social stories and group discussions, and frequent communication between herself and the parents, and when necessary the guidance counselor.

Lindsay also discussed during her interview how the school has been able to meet the unmet physical needs of her students through the free and reduced lunch program, but the school is unable to meet more significant needs. Lindsay stated:

Our school does a good job figuring out the baseline needs, such as food, clothing, water, and taking care of them. We provide breakfast and lunch at school and send backpacks home on the weekends for families that we know need food. We can’t help the bigger needs though, because we are a small school and community. We really need more support from outside agencies.
Lindsay also recognized more students were coming to school with unmet social and emotional needs. In order to meet these needs Lindsay has tried to meet her students where they are and building relationships that allow for open, honest communication. Lindsay stated:

I try to build the base foundation with my students so everyone feels safe in my classroom. Then I really try to focus on those students who seem to struggle and make sure they have made connections with good peers and the school counselor. I really to try to notice where kids are coming from, their backgrounds and life experiences, and continually check in with them.

This narrative briefly describes the classroom climate Lindsay as created in order to meet the social and emotional needs of her students. By establishing a strong foundation that leads to positive relationships among all individuals in the classroom, Lindsay is able to really get to know her students and monitor their needs.

Jonathon shared during his interview that more students are entering his classroom unfed, dirty, and at times, unable to learn. He examined the supports the school has put in place to try and meet the needs of these students. Jonathon stated:

We provide breakfast and lunch for all students, if they want it, at our school. The guidance counselor can get clothes when they are needed. We also hand out community resource forms often to our students so families know where they can get help within the community. Teachers also provide food to kids and go to the right channels, like the guidance counselor, to get help.

Jonathon argued that social and emotional needs are just as important as physical needs, and that more students are getting off the bus with these being unmet. Jonathon stated:
Social and emotional needs are very important and if these needs remain unmet, students are unable to learn adequately in the classroom. I have purposely tried to meet students’ social and emotional needs by checking in with kids through our character education lessons and small group discussions, and one on one conversations. If I don’t take time to do this, they won’t learn. We need to focus on emotions first, then academics.

Based on Jonathon’s statement, social and emotional needs also require the teachers’ attention and support from the school system. Jonathon believed that students were unable to learn or pay attention during class if they had pressing social and emotional needs. He argued that these needs must come first and be met, before any learning can take place.

**Guiding Question 3:**

How do teachers build relationships with their students in the classroom? Participants shared their perceptions of how teachers build relationships with their students, often referring to their favorite teacher and experiences they shared with them. All student participants evaluated how nice their teacher was, often referring to how that teacher provided for them and made them feel in the classroom. David stated during his interview:

> My favorite teacher was really nice to me. She would always say hi when I come into the room, she would help me out when I needed help, and she usually knew when I needed help without me even having to ask. She made me feel safe.

This narrative briefly describes how David’s favorite teacher was able to build a relationship with him, as well as his classmates, through her caring personality, by anticipating when students would need extra help and providing the help, consequently making her students feel safe in their classroom and school. Michael, similar to David, characterized his teacher as a caring individual who made a point to get to know him, sharing during his interview, “My favorite teacher was
really nice. She remembered things I told her and would ask about my life.” Michael explained how his teacher made him feel special because she paid attention to him and what he had to say, even if it wasn’t about school. Kara agreed with Michael, noting how her favorite teacher made her feel valuable. Kara stated during her interview:

My favorite teacher made me feel like I mattered. She always asked me how I was doing and made sure I had food for breakfast and lunch. She even gave me a pair of sneakers when mine got holes in them. She also came to some of my intramural sports games that are after school and on Saturdays.

Based on Kara’s statement, the student-teacher relationship starts with a caring teacher who has a genuine interest in the student and their well-being. A teacher is able to demonstrate their authentic feelings for their students through their conversations, ability to ensure the student has what they need to succeed during the school day, and even makes a point to get to the know the student and their interests.

Emma shared during her interview that her teacher built a relationship with her by being very nice and caring and not giving too much work. Matthew echoed with Emma said during his interview, sharing, “My teacher is kind, nice, and caring. She asks me about my weekend and what I do for fun outside of school. She makes school fun by telling silly stories and jokes.” In addition to being nice and genuine, Matthew believed that his teacher was able to build relationships by opening up to the class and sharing stories and jokes that made her more relatable. “Her stories are great, they show us that she’s a real person outside of school, and that her family is just as crazy and loud as mine is,” stated Matthew during his interview.

Jacob continued the idea of teachers being able to build relationships with their students through their caring actions and kind words during his interview when he stated:
She was so nice. She actually cared about me and the fact that I hate school. She didn't yell at me, she was calm. At home I get yelled at a lot, but this teacher never raised her voice. They even dropped stuff off at my house that I needed for remote learning.

This narrative briefly describes the actions of a teacher Jacob built a genuine relationship with. Through this teacher’s calm presence and compassionate actions, Jacob was able to trust his teacher and begin to count on her to provide for him both in school, and at times, out of school.

Andrew also shared during his interview how his teacher was able to build a relationship with him by being kind and making school more interesting. Andrew said, “He is pretty fun, cool, amazing, and kind. He teaches us stuff, but makes it interesting.” Jessica expanded on Andrew’s idea revealing that in order to build a relationship with your teacher the teacher needs to be more than just nice, they need to really care for their students. Jessica stated:

My favorite teacher wasn't just nice, she really cared for me. She talked to me like I mattered. Would ask me questions and actually listened. She also remembered things about me. Whenever I see her now, even though she is not my teacher anymore, she always says hi and still remembers things about me, even if it's at the grocery store.

Based on Jessica’s statement, building a student-teacher relationship takes more than a nice person, it takes a teacher who really cares about their students and wants to hear what they have to say. Jessica demonstrated that students are able to distinguish being someone just being nice and someone who is genuine and authentic. Carly shared a similar sentiment during her interview, revealing that her teacher was not only nice, but caring and able to make all students feel important. Carly stated:

My favorite teacher was really sweet, kind, and nice. She really cared about me and my classmates. She always asked us about our lives outside of school, like about sports or
what we did over the weekend. She also was willing to help me with anything I asked.

She never made me feel stupid or unimportant.

This narrative briefly explains how Carly’s teacher was able to build relationships with her students. Through the teacher’s actions and words she made her students feel intelligent, important, and a part of the classroom community.

Allison, Lindsay, and Jonathon shared the intentional acts they use every day in their classrooms in order to build relationships with their students. Allison stated during her interview:

I greet every student as they enter the classroom and say good-bye as they leave. I focus on building peer relationships and communication skills through role play and small group discussions. I teach character education every morning for 15 minutes, focusing on self-regulation, mindset, and mindfulness. I use journals where the students can write private notes to me and I can then write notes back to them. I really focus on talking to all of my students, listening to them, and really trying to get to know them as a person.

Based on Allison’s statement, the teacher is able to create an environment where students know they belong simply through the words the teacher uses, the teacher’s ability to listen to their students, and the teacher’s willingness to take the time to focus on the students’ social and emotional well-being through mindfulness and character education lessons. The teacher is also able to create open forms of communication through one-on-one dialogue, both in person and through journals, as well as through small group discussions, which allows students to know they are seen, heard, and understood. Allison continued to reveal the importance the classroom community has on the student-teacher relationship during her survey when she stated:

Classroom culture involves creating an environment where students feel safe and free to
be involved. It's a space where everyone should feel accepted and included in everything. Students should be comfortable with sharing how they feel, and teachers should be willing to take it in to help improve learning. I purposely have students work with different students on a daily basis so they not only build new friendships, but so they get to know students from a different background. I have a classroom pledge that we begin every day with; it reminds students they are smart and important. We hold classroom meetings so that students feel safe sharing their feelings or thoughts. We also read stories about having a positive/growth mindset and what it means to have grit.

This narrative briefly describes the intentional actions Allison takes every day in her classroom that build class community and culture, while also building student-teacher relationships. Through open, continual communication, planned pairings and groupings, and a safe environment Allison is able to express to her students they are valued, important, and will be provided for. Lindsay echoed Allison’s belief of open communication with and among her students, and the necessity of building a class community where everyone feels valued during her interview, stating:

I try and use humor a lot with my students, to lighten things, like behavior issues, so it can then translate into positive behaviors. I try to greet every student by name. I also pull students aside to share in accomplishments, point out positives, and debrief with students when their actions or the actions of others lead to misbehaviors in the classroom.

Based on Lindsay’s statement, teachers can use small, intentional acts that allows for students to feel accomplishment, learn from their behaviors, and recognize their teacher sees them and is able to provide for them through meaningful words. Lindsay continued sharing her ideas of how to build a classroom community where students feel safe and student-teacher relationships are a
priority during her survey. Lindsay stated:

I hope that my students see my classroom as a safe place. I try to do things like using humor, singing directions to them, and encouraging them to be advocates for themselves in their academic lives. I want them to respectfully question teachers, to ask for what they need, and be aware of why they are doing things in their education. I try to give them specific feedback on what they are doing well, academically, socially, and behaviorally. If I see kids who are behaving and working hard consistently, I try to pull them aside and let them know I see them and know how well they are doing.

This narrative briefly describes how Lindsay is able to build up her classroom community and student-teacher relationships through disarming techniques like singing to her students and welcoming them at the door, as well as through empowering conversations that allow students to take charge of their education.

Jonathon also shared during his interview the significance making students feel valued and important has on the student-teacher relationship and that through small, intentional acts teachers are able to accomplish this on a daily basis. Jonathon stated:

I make a point to greet each student at the door, ask about their lives and listen, let them talk when they need to talk, give individual encouragement, and make a point to go to their outside activities like sporting events, band concerts, and plays.

Based on Jonathon’s statement, teachers can build a relationship with their student by making them feel comfortable when they enter the classroom, really listening to what they have to say, and by providing encouragement in and outside of the classroom. Jonathon also discussed the necessity of a positive classroom environment during his survey. Jonathon stated:

Over the last 10 years I have really focused on my classroom community and have tried
to be very intentional about my interactions with my students. I try to get them to talk about their hobbies or favorite things. I allow students to communicate with each other and myself about non-academic things during class work time as long as they are completing their classwork. This act alone has allowed students to get to know their classmates in a new way that usually builds new friendships. It also allows students to share with me things about their life that is not related to school. They really get a kick when I ask them about something they told me about a couple days ago and it shows them I do care and was listening.

This narrative briefly explains how Jonathon uses a more relaxed classroom environment to get to know his students on a non-academic level, which leads to a student-teacher relationship that allows students to feel comfortable in his classroom and reveals he is listening and is present for them.

**Summary**

In this chapter, participant responses were organized and viewed through themes that emerged from the data and also according to the central question and guiding questions that the case study sought to answer. Participants were forthcoming in their responses to the survey, interview, and focus group questions and provided a broad perspective to how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom. The majority of participants determined that the student-teacher relationship was an integral component of the upper elementary classroom in relation to student motivation. Many participants noted that intentional acts by the teacher build up the student-teacher relationship while also creating a classroom environment where students felt safe, cared for, and valued. Finally, it was revealed that teachers try to provide for their students when they enter their
classroom with unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs by giving them food, clothes, school materials, and connecting them with school staff or community organizations to provide further assistance; however, students were more impacted by the knowledge that their teacher was simply there for them through their genuine and authentic words and actions.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study examined how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation within the upper elementary classroom for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students at a small, rural school in southeastern Pennsylvania. A summary of findings and a cross case synthesis are reported based on the central question and guiding questions. Discussion of the findings and implications in conjunction with implications of the relevant literature and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need theory are reviewed. Implications of the study along with delimitations and limitations are summarized. Finally, recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

A summary of findings is presented in this section as they related to the central question and guiding questions that steered this study. Through analysis of the data collected through surveys, interviews, and a focus group five major themes emerged from the data that included: influence of home environment, importance of school environment, impact of classroom environment, significance of teacher, and external factors impacting student motivation. The central question and subsequent guiding questions were examined in relation to the discovered themes and an answer to each question was then evident. Each question is presented and followed by relevant findings developed from participant responses. The findings include perceptions of upper elementary, grades fourth, fifth, and sixth, students and upper elementary, grades fourth, fifth, and sixth, teachers based on their experiences within the elementary classroom.

Central Question
The Central Question asked, “How are student-teacher relationships connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom?” The study revealed that most student participants and all teacher participants believe the student-teacher relationship is connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom. According to student participant interview responses, students need to feel comfortable with their teacher, as well as trust them, in order to really learn in their classroom. Student interview responses demonstrated that when a student feels comfortable with their teacher and trusts them, they are more willing to ask questions and take chances throughout their learning. Additionally, student interview and focus group responses revealed students will do less work or none at all if they do not believe their teacher cares about them because they do not think the teacher will actually help. Student survey responses denoted student-teacher relationships are important for the entire class climate because they empower students and help them to believe they matter.

According to teacher participant survey responses, the student-teacher relationship is the most important thing in the classroom. Teacher interview responses revealed that more students are entering the classroom with additional needs and outside baggage, that if not addressed will prevent the student from learning. Teacher interview and focus group responses also demonstrated that students need to feel comfortable in the classroom and with the teacher in order for the student to ask questions and participate in lessons. Additionally, teacher interview responses established that students need to feel valued in order to show respect to themselves, their peers, and their teacher; when students know they matter to the classroom community their behavior improves and more engagement takes place in the class.

**Guiding Question One**

Guiding Question One asked, “What affect does unmet physical, physiological, mental,
and emotional needs have on students in the classroom?” Based on teacher participant survey responses, unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs are having an increased, negative impact on students in the classroom. Teacher survey and interview responses denoted students entering the classroom with unmet needs are unable to focus during class, significantly lowering their participation and engagement level, because they seem preoccupied worrying about their unmet needs. Teacher interview responses also revealed that outside factors that impact student needs contribute to their daily behavior in the classroom; if a student has had all their basic needs met the night and morning before school then they are more engaged and able to participate with their class.

**Guiding Question Two**

Guiding Question Two asked, “How are teachers meeting the unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs of their students?” According to student and teacher participant interview responses, teachers are meeting most unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs of their students within their own classrooms. Student survey, interview, and focus group responses indicated teachers have ensured that their students feel welcome, comfortable, and safe within the classroom community through a caring personality. Student responses also denoted teachers make sure their students have eaten breakfast and have a lunch, and when a student has not been fed or needs additional food, the teacher provides the student with food right there in the classroom. Additionally, student interview responses indicated teachers provide any additional school supplies or material items students might need, such as clothing or shoes, often recognizing a need before the student even voices a concern.

Teacher survey, interview, and focus group responses demonstrated that teachers provide for their students mental and emotional needs through open communication and character
building/mindfulness lessons that take place individually, as well as in whole groups and small groups. Teacher interview responses also demonstrated teachers provide for their students physical needs by giving them food when they come to school hungry and making sure they are signed up to receive the free and reduced breakfast and lunch from the school. According to teacher survey responses, student physiological needs are addressed when the teacher coordinates with school staff and community agencies to provide assistance for the student and their family.

**Guiding Question Three**

Guiding Question Three asked, “How do teachers build relationships with their students in the classroom?” The study revealed simple, but yet vital approaches teachers can utilize in their classrooms to build student-teacher relationships that positively impact students. According to student interview and focus group responses, teachers can start building relationships by first being nice to their students and then genuinely caring for them. Student interview responses denoted students respond to teachers who actually listen to them, really want to hear what they have to say, and make their students believe that they matter. Student interview responses also shared teachers can build a relationship with their students by making them feel comfortable and safe in the classroom; through positive interactions students will begin to trust their teacher and open up to them. Finally, student focus group responses demonstrated that students build relationships with those teachers they know they can count on and will help them when they ask for help.

According to teacher interview responses, teachers can begin to build relationships with their students as soon as they enter the classroom simply by greeting them by saying their name. Teacher survey responses denoted teachers need to create a classroom climate where everyone
feels like they belong, can contribute to the classroom, feel free to ask questions, and are encouraged to take risks. Additionally, teacher interview responses demonstrated the importance of intentional acts that allow students to know their teacher genuinely cares about them and their entire well-being. Through purposeful decisions and plans, such as character and mindset lessons, student groupings, open communication and seating, and humorous stories, teachers are able to build a community of learners that trusts each other and believes their teacher is there for them.

Discussion

The discussion of the findings of this multiple case study included examining the correlation of the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The theoretical and empirical literature are discussed in the context of corroboration, extension, and diversion of previous speech. Novel contributions from this study are discussed in the context of contribution to the literature and an extension on the theory informing the topic.

Theoretical Research

Abraham Maslow (1954) studied human motivation in relation to human needs being met. He determined five levels of human needs, affirming that in order for humans to be motivated they must have their basic needs met first (Maslow, 1954). The foundational level of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs consists of basic physiological needs every human must attain in order to proceed and succeed throughout their life. The basic physiological needs are: food, water, shelter, and rest (Maslow, 1954). Educators have taken Maslow’s work and applied it to student motivation and academic achievement in the classroom (Schunk, 2016). Low-achieving students often come to school with their foundational level of physiological needs unmet (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). In order for academic achievement to rise and student motivation to
increase students’ physiological needs must be met either by their parents or the school system (McLeod, 2016). Findings from this multiple case study support Maslow’s theory and corroborated the importance of students having their physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs met within the classroom whenever they are entering with unmet needs in order for the student to be able to fully participate in their classroom. The teacher participants included in this study plainly understood the connection between students having their basic needs met prior to entering the classroom in order for the students to be engaged in the classroom, and they demonstrated how meeting these unmet needs as soon as they walk into the school building or the classroom was able to alter the entire day for the student, often impacting not only their physical well-being, but also their mental well-being.

Food scarcity throughout American homes continues to increase and impact many families. In 2014, approximately 17.4 million households in the United States experienced food insecurity (Gundersen et al., 2015). Food insufficiency affects parental stress and mental health. As food uncertainty and parental anxiety increased the emotional climate of the home, as well as the parent-child relationships, decreased, which greatly affected the children of these homes both physically and mentally (Gill et al., 2018). Students need to demonstrate a healthy mindset in order to perform in the classroom and properly engage within the school system (Arguedas et al., 2016). When a student enters the classroom with a healthy mindset they are able to recognize their emotions, regulate their feelings, and participate in the classroom and lessons in a more meaningful and engaging manner (Arguedas et al., 2016). According to this study there has been an increase in students coming to school underfed, as well as the necessity for students to receive food assistance at school so that they are able to improve their mindset and participate in the classroom. This study also extended the research by examining the impact the teachers’ act of
giving their students food has had on their students’ well-being and mindset. It was determined that through these actions, students were more willing to engage in a student-teacher relationship. The student participants in this study commented on how it made them feel when their teacher provided them with food right there in the classroom. The students who received food assistance from their teachers shared this simple act allowed them to begin to trust their teacher and believe that their teacher actually cared about them and was not just being nice.

Another basic physiological need within Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is rest. Children are impacted by the warmth, sensitivity, and responsivity of their parents, however, these parenting qualities are affected by finances, parental mental health, and parental preparedness (Orri et al., 2019). This study confirmed a student’s home life has significant impact on their mindset and ability to function within the classroom. The teacher participants within the study noted a student’s ability to perform in the classroom is directly tied to what happens to them the morning of and the night before the school day. Additionally, it extended the research by determining students who feel safe within their classroom, begin to trust their teachers and will engage within their classroom community in a more open, meaningful manner. The student participants of this study shared when they begin to trust their teacher they also begin to participate more with other students in the class because they know their teacher will ensure everyone is respected among the classroom community and understanding between all classroom community members is built and expressed.

With more students entering the classroom with unmet physiological needs schools have begun to recognize the educational implications and the challenges facing school systems (Dudaite, 2016). Jeffrey et al. (2013) conducted a study of teacher-student caring relationships that focused on how teachers meet students’ physiological needs. The study revealed how
meeting those needs created a positive relationship between teachers and students, which in turn positively affected student achievement in the classroom. Findings from this multiple case study corroborated the impact of meeting students’ unmet physiological needs within the classroom has on student-teacher relationships. The teacher participants from this study revealed they are able to recognize a change in students’ willingness to create a meaningful relationship when their students begin to acknowledge the teacher really does care about them and wants what is best for them. In addition, this study has expanded the research to include the necessity for students to trust their teacher and fully believe they will be there for them no matter what. The student participants from this study demonstrated their ability to distinguish between nice teachers and caring teachers. They revealed they all have had several nice teachers, however, it was the teachers who actually cared and were genuine that were the teachers the students believed and knew they could depend on.

Maslow (1954) established the necessity for basic needs to be met in order for one to progress and utilize motivation to encourage continual improvement and growth. As humans progress up the hierarchy of needs pyramid, motivation and achievement does increase. Therefore, teachers are capable of meeting students’ basic needs solely through positive, genuine student-teacher relationships (Lonn & Dantzler, 2017). The results of this study confirmed authentic student-teacher relationships are built when teachers meet basic needs within their classrooms and create a genuine relationship with their students. This study also extended the research by determining students are able to distinguish when a teacher is being genuine and authentic. Thus, students are impacted by their teachers’ words, however, it is their teachers’ actions that demonstrate the students’ true value in the eyes of their teacher.
Empirical Research

The results of this study revealed that there are many factors that impact student motivation in the classroom. This study demonstrated teachers are aware of when students enter their classrooms with unmet needs and do their best to meet those need right there in their classroom, and when that is not possible teachers employ the assistance of other school staff and community agencies. However, the study also established that student-teacher relationships have the ability to overcome factors that negatively impact student motivation in the upper elementary classroom even when teachers are not always able to meet the unmet needs of their students. The empirical literature that was instrumental in the formation of this study examined the factors that influence student motivation in the upper elementary classroom, how teachers are meeting any unmet basic needs of their students, how teachers are creating relationships with their students, and the impact the student-teacher relationship has on student motivation.

Student Motivation

Student motivation within the classroom is considered to be an integral component for student achievement (Dykstra Steinbrenner & Watson, 2015) which is substantially affected by a student’s home environment, support received by family, peers, and teachers, and ability to set goals for oneself (Dierendonck et al., 2019). Students need to believe they are a part of and belong to their classroom community (Karakus, 2017). This study confirmed these findings and determined that student motivation can be altered when students’ needs are met in the classroom by a teacher they view as being genuine and authentic with their actions. The student participants in this study shared how the feeling of belongingness within their classroom community impacted their outlook on school and their ability to function within the classroom community.
Additionally, studies determined that students who valued the investment their family, school and community was putting into them, were more motivated in the classroom than their peers who were from communities that lacked involvement in the local schools and families (Dierendonck et al., 2019). This study corroborated these findings and extended the research by demonstrating the impact stakeholders have on student motivation when they collaborate to ensure all of the students’ needs are being met. The teacher participants in this study shared how they, along with the school system, have begun to meet the needs of their students both at school, and by connecting families with local organizations that can provide assistance when the school is unable to. The teacher participants revealed, through these partnerships, student and family needs are being met more readily and more authentic relationships are being built between members of the surrounding community. These relationships are allowing a small, rural school system, with minimal support and supplies, to assist more students and families with greater needs that in the past would have been insurmountable.

**Parental Rejection**

Parental engagement encompasses a parent’s ability to be present at home with their child, as well as, how involved the parent is in the child’s education. Adamski et al. (2013) determined parental involvement has a significant impact on student achievement and concluded disadvantaged students, who are part of the low-income and single-parent families, are more likely to experience parental rejection, enter school with unmet physiological needs, and struggle academically, socially, and behaviorally at school. In order for students to succeed in the classroom they need a supportive home that will provide for their basic needs in addition to being involved in their education (Joshi & Acharya, 2013). When a parent is unwilling or unable to provide any or all of these basic physiological needs the school system must establish
practices that can be put in place to assist these students. This study confirmed the impact parental rejection has on student motivation in the classroom, as well as their overall well-being. Teacher participants revealed the need for students to have all of their basic physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs met, either at home or when they walk into the school building, in order to be present enough to participate fully in the classroom. However, this study did not determine what the school system is doing beyond providing a free breakfast and lunch for students in a systematic manner that provides for all unmet needs of their students. Teacher participants described how these needs are currently being met in their small, rural school district, but also acknowledged their school system and individual teachers need help. The student participants described how their teachers help them or their fellow students, focusing on the impact the teachers’ considerate actions have had on their physical and mental well-being. However, the teacher participants continued by stating what they are doing is not enough and voicing that the school system should establish protocols that allow teachers to continue supporting students in the classroom so that the student-teacher relationships will continue to grow, but ensure teachers receive the support they need to continue providing for students while also guaranteeing all basic, student physiological needs are being met.

Parental rejection has also contributed to the decrease in social and emotional health of students. The social and emotional well-being of students has become a significant concern of school systems across the United States (Lawler et al., 2017). Newland et al. (2019) reported a child’s emotional well-being is dependent on their current emotional development and affects their development in other areas. Therefore, Newland et al. (2019) argue schools need to be cognizant of their students’ emotional well-being. This study evaluated how the student participants felt at home, in addition to how they felt at school. The data demonstrated that
students were aware of their mental state and could often voice how they were feeling, as well as what was causing them to feel that way. Additionally, this study expanded the research by revealing ways in which the teachers could assist students with their mental well-being. The teacher participants acknowledged that students’ mental health was extremely important for their overall well-being and stated they conduct daily mindfulness and character education lessons to address social and emotional health of their students. The teachers stated these lessons also help to build up their classroom community and the authenticity of the student-teacher relationships.

**Student-Teacher Relationships**

The student-teacher relationship has changed significantly over the last decade. Student-teacher relationships no longer consist solely of a teacher presenting a new concept to their students and helping them master that skill. Rather student-teacher relationships are now considered to be foundational for both students’ academic and emotional growth (Cook et al., 2018). Farmer (2018) argues teachers need to focus not only on understanding their content area, setting high expectations, and engaging students in their lessons, but also on their relationships with their students and meeting their needs that go beyond academics. Teachers are aware of the students who are struggling academically, socially, emotionally, physically, and physiologically in their classroom. Students who are not having their basic, psychological needs met are unable to meaningfully participate in their daily life and greatly benefit from positive student-teaching relationships (Lonn & Dantzler, 2017). This study confirms the importance of student-teacher relationships, corroborating the research that states student-teacher relationships can assist students who experience unmet basic needs by providing them with emotional support within the classroom. Additionally, this study expands the research by demonstrating teachers are able to build their student-teacher relationships by providing for their students unmet needs,
leading to feelings of authenticity and trust. Student participants in this study revealed how they began to trust their teachers when they understood them, their needs, and were able to provide them with assistance.

Student-teacher relationships significantly affect how social and behavioral issues manifest within the classroom (Zee & Roorda, 2018). Through a trusting, authentic student-teacher relationship teachers are able to create a classroom community where all students feel safe and comfortable being themselves. Students need to know and believe their teachers value them and their place within the classroom (Wilcox et al., 2016). Positive student-teacher relationships within the classroom have the ability to influence students to work harder within the classroom and strive for their goals (Farmer, 2018). Findings from this research confirm the impact student-teacher relationships have on the classroom community, demonstrating the more a student feels safe in their classroom the more they are willing to trust their teacher, as well as their peers, which lead to increased participating and willingness to ask questions and volunteer during lessons. Student participants in this study shared how teachers who were not only nice, but truly caring individuals, would make them feel safe within the classroom by making them feel valued, heard, and provided for. The study expanded on the research by incorporating how teachers were able to build student-teacher relationships through simple acts like greeting students at the door, asking how they were, actually listening to the student, and demonstrating that they really cared for the student by providing for them in unique ways that contributed to their overall well-being.

**Characteristics of an Effective Teacher**

Students are no longer entering school just to gain an education, but they are entering the classroom hungry, dirty, and often scared, thus forcing teachers to not only educate their
students, but provide for them in ways that was once provided for in the home (Newcomer, 2018). In order to empower more students so that they are socially and academically engaged in the classroom, teachers need to embrace change within their classroom, utilizing new teaching methods and ideas that reach students where they are, not where teachers think they should be (Steinbrenner & Watson, 2015). Students continue to improve and make substantial academic gains, even when they are struggling in the classroom, when they recognize that their teacher has a positive attitude towards them and that their teacher believes in the student’s abilities to succeed (Leggio & Terras, 2019). Effective teachers set their expectations extremely high, but are comfortable with themselves and their students when those expectations are not met (Ruzek et al., 2016). This study confirmed effective teaching practices encompass high expectations, meeting students where they are, and being prepared to assist students with unmet needs to often go beyond academics. The teacher participants in this study evaluated how they approach their classroom structure, noting they have high expectations, set clear standards and routines for their students, but try to create a relaxed atmosphere so students feel comfortable to engage with the classroom, teacher, and their peers.

Effective teachers also take into consideration their students’ well-being and emotional needs, recognizing that these needs are critical for student success and for high quality instruction to take place in the classroom (Ruzek et al., 2016). By focusing on and providing for both academic and emotional needs teachers are meeting their students where they are when they walk through the classroom door (Leggio & Terras, 2019). Teachers who possess the ability to really listen to their students have proven to be more effective than teachers who focus solely on curriculum (Leggio & Terras, 2019). The findings from this study corroborated this research, emphasizing the need for teachers to address the mental and emotional well-being of their
students before attempting to educate their students. Additionally, the study revealed students were able to distinguish between nice teachers and those who really cared for them, those they really trusted, by noticing who actually listened to them. This study expanded the research by revealing teachers and school systems need to address the unmet needs of their students before attempting academics, however, students were able to participate more within the classrooms of those teachers who they trusted even when their needs went unmet because they knew their teacher was trying to provide for them in any way they could. The simple acts of kindness, even when they did not meet every need of the student, provided students with an emotional tie to the teacher that supported their emotional and mental well-being.

Implications

The intent of this multiple case study was to develop an in-depth understanding of how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation within the upper elementary classroom for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students at a small, rural school in southeastern Pennsylvania. The theoretical implications involve the effect that the findings of this multiple case study may have on Maslow’s hierarchy of need (Maslow, 1954), which guided this study. Empirical implications are then established that extend the scope of knowledge to the current body of research. Practical implications of importance are then discussed, so teachers, administrators, and district officials can consider them when making decisions that will impact the school climate and classroom culture, as well as decisions that involved how best to meet the unmet needs of their students.

Theoretical Implications

The conceptual framework of this multiple case study applies to Maslow’s hierarchy of need (Maslow, 1954). The theoretical significance of this study aimed to demonstrate how
meeting any unmet physiological needs of students within the classroom impacts student motivation (Dudaite, 2016). Low achieving students can make tremendous gains when they feel connected to their school and peers, and feel cared for by their teachers (Veiskarami et al., 2017). The theoretical implication gained from this study is that students will not only be motivated within their classroom when their unmet needs are provided for by their teachers, but they will also begin to build a meaningful relationship with their teacher because the small actions taken by their teachers to provide for those unmet needs allow the student to begin to trust their teachers. The findings from this study have determined that trust is the foundation needed by students to build a student-teacher relationship that goes beyond motivation in the classroom and even the necessity of having their unmet needs met. The trust built during these interactions provide students with a sense of self-worth, where they begin to believe that they matter to someone and belong somewhere, and a knowledge that they now have someone who they can lean on.

Thus, it is recommended for teachers to consider how they are cultivating student-teacher relationships within their classroom by examining their non-academic interactions with their students that often take place during homeroom, transition times, and breaks throughout the school day. Once teachers understand how they are using this non-academic time, the next recommendation is for teachers to create simple routines that allow themselves to get to know their students more while also allowing their students to get to know them. Simple routines could include saying hello as every student enters the classroom and asking “get to know you questions” every day where students begin to open up, recognizing that their teacher is actually listening to them and wants to know their answers, while also being able to hear how the teacher would answer those same questions.
The final recommendation for teachers is to have authentic one-on-one interactions with their students so that trust is able to be built on a foundational level for each student. One-on-one interactions seem daunting at times for teachers, especially when they are required to accomplish so much throughout the school day, however, they can take place during quieter times or transition times throughout the school day. These interactions have the ability to significantly impact the student’s willingness to trust their teacher because now the student-teacher relationship is not just about academics or even the student as a member of classroom community, but about the student as an individual.

**Empirical Implications**

The empirical significance intended to expand research about both student physiological needs and motivational levels and how both are tied to student-teaching relationships. Karakus (2017) demonstrated that a negative school climate leads to a negative student perception, greatly affecting a student’s academic ability and the student’s sense of community and belongingness. The findings from this multiple case study increased the body of research by highlighting participants’ perceptions of student motivation in the upper elementary classroom, how school systems and teachers are providing for students’ unmet needs, and how student-teacher relationships impact student behaviors in the classroom. This qualitative study extends the scope of the body of research concerning authentic student-teacher relationships built on trust and the intentionality of teachers and has developed several recommendations for teachers.

The first empirical recommendation for teachers is to evaluate the motivation level of all of their students as they enter their classrooms at the beginning of the year. Once teachers determine the motivation level of each of their students the teacher can then begin to understand what is positively and negatively impacting each student’s motivational level. Teachers can then
utilize the classroom community, student-teacher relationships, and components of the surrounding community to reach each student where they currently are in hopes to increase their motivational level through personal interactions that will benefit the student.

The second empirical recommendation for teachers is to recognize any student that is experiencing parental rejection and facing any unmet physical, physiological, mental, or emotional needs. When these students have been identified the teacher can then begin to focus on meeting those students’ needs through positive interactions in the classroom, providing them with simple things that can meet their needs in the classroom or the school building. They can also concentrate on helping those students to establish relationships with school staff and outside organizations that can provide additional support, and focus on the mental and emotional health of the student through mindset lesson and character education.

The final empirical recommendation for teachers is to focus on the techniques they use within their classroom that enable them to meet students where they are both academically, as well as socially. By utilizing effective teaching practices, such as setting high expectations while also understanding academic and mental needs of their students, teachers will be able to create a classroom community where student-teacher relationship are able to be established. These relationships will then begin to motivate students through the teacher actions of meeting the students’ needs through genuine, trusting relationships.

Practical Implications

The practical significance of this study set out to embolden the school system being studied, as well as other school systems, to begin to consider how they can improve student-teacher relationships and school climate as a whole in order to improve upon student motivation in the classroom (Joshi & Acharya, 2013). Classroom management, staff relations, and school
climate are strongly tied to student achievement, therefore Back et al. (2016) suggested for school districts to provide professional development and resources to allow teachers to improve their practices within the classroom and the school as a whole. The findings from this study have led to several practical implications.

The practical implication for teachers is to examine what intentional acts they do every day in their classroom to meet the unmet needs of their students, as well as to build a classroom community where all students believe they are valued. This is because class community and small, intentional acts have proven to be the foundation needed by students to trust their teachers. The findings revealed teachers who intentionally interacted with their students beyond the curriculum were able to build student-teacher relationships that impacted the students’ behavior and motivation in the classroom, as well as students’ ability to believe they mattered which resulted in them trusting their teacher. Thus, it is recommended that teachers focus on building a class community where students feel valued and cared for and engage in daily intentional acts that will build trusting relationships with their students.

The practical implications for administration is to evaluate the current school climate within their building to determine if students and staff members feel safe, comfortable, and appreciated. When students and staff believe they are a part of a larger community, where others recognize their importance and are willing the help them when needed, students and staff will bring those positive feelings not only into the school building each day, but also into their classroom community. Therefore, it is recommended that school administration conduct an audit of their students, staff, and parents to determine how they are feeling within the school system, in order to determine the school’s areas of strength and areas of weakness. Once the audit has been conducted school administration can begin to meet with students, staff, and parents to create a
plan to meet any areas of need.

The practical implication for district officials is to conclude what physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs are not being met for their students at home, while also determining what their staff is currently providing for their students. The school district needs to define what unmet needs must be met in order for their students to succeed in the classroom while also allowing their staff to continue to meet some of these unmet needs in the classroom, so that student-teacher relationships continue to flourish on the foundation of trust. Findings from this study demonstrated the necessity for students to have their unmet needs met at school when they are unable to be met at home. Additionally, the study revealed teachers and the school system are unable to meet all of these needs. Therefore, it is recommended that school officials develop a comprehensive plan that allows teachers, school buildings, the school system, and community organizations to work together to meet these needs so that all needs are met, but continues to allow the student and their families to build lasting relationships within the school system and community.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are restrictions set for the study (Patton, 2015). A multiple case study was appropriate for the purposeful sampling of teachers and students within upper elementary classrooms, which was the bounded system. Thus, this sampling involved studying cases in depth to understand important cases rather than generalizing from a sample to a population (Patton, 2015).

The primary delimitations of this multiple case study was the decision to only include teachers who have taught for at least five years. To add to this delimitation, only one school district in Pennsylvania was used in the study. Another delimitation of the study was to only
include students from the upper elementary grades: fourth, fifth, and sixth. The results of the study may also not be indicative of school districts with different demographics.

The first limitation of this study was the generality of the findings from the multiple case study (Yin, 2018). The results were not all inclusive of all teachers’ and students’ perceptions of student-teacher relationships impact on student motivation due to the sample selected and the focus on upper elementary grades. The second limitation of this study was the learning environment of the classes and the way in which they were delivered (remote learning at times). The researcher cannot control the environment and must be upfront and reveal biases to foster open communication as the human instrument of the study so that everyday situations could be reported (Yin, 2014). The final limitation was the teachers’ past experiences with addressing social and emotional needs within the classroom. Veteran teachers’ have different knowledge and comfort levels with addressing social and emotional needs within their classroom. This prior knowledge and experience has the ability to support a teacher’s ability to address these needs. These limitations could not be controlled by the researcher. The limitations may have potentially influenced the findings of the study.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Many questions can be developed on the impact student-teacher relationships have on student motivation in the classroom. Further qualitative multiple case studies that observe student-teacher relationships within the junior high and senior high classroom are necessary to expand the current body of research. These case studies can assist in the determination of the importance of student-teacher relationships and evaluate how these relationships are cultivated within the junior high and senior high classroom. Additionally, more qualitative case studies should be conducted to assess how student-teacher relationships impact student social and
emotional well-being are needed to expand the current body of research. These case studies should also consider the age of the students and the grade level of the classroom they are studying to determine the impact student-teacher relationships have within the elementary, junior high, and senior high settings. Moreover, additional qualitative phenomenological studies that assess how student-teacher relationships impact continued student motivation over a student’s academic career would benefit the current body of research. These studies are needed in order to develop a deeper understanding of how the student-teacher relationship can be leveraged in the classroom in order to meet the continued needs of students and to create professional development that equips teachers with methods to help build lasting, authentic student-teacher relationships. As future studies emerge, other school systems and educators will be able to evaluate practices used to build student-teacher relationships and adopt practices that will benefit their teaching practices.

**Summary**

Findings in this multiple case study were summarized as they pertained to the research questions. Findings were then discussed in relation of their corroboration, extension, and novel contribution to the current body of research. Theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for the findings were presented in a detailed manner. Delimitations and limitations of this multiple case study were also reviewed. Last, recommendations for future research were presented. In conclusion, student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation in the upper elementary classroom. For this multiple case study, it was concluded that students who enter the classroom with unmet needs engage less within the classroom community and curriculum, however, these students’ behaviors begin to improve when their unmet needs are met by their teachers through intentional acts and the student-teacher relationship begins to build on a
foundation of trust. Teachers from small, rural communities who have little support can meet the unmet needs of their students through small, purposeful acts that demonstrate their authenticity.
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DOI:10.5406/amerjpsyc.126.2.0155


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Permission to Conduct Research

July 20, 2020
Amanda King
James Swezey

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY19-20-469 A Case Study Examining the Connections between Student-Teacher Relationships and Student Motivation in the Upper Elementary Classroom

Dear Amanda King, James Swezey:

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the date of the IRB meeting at which the protocol was approved: July 20, 2020. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make modifications in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update submission to the IRB. These submissions can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office
July 15, 2020
Appendix B: School Permission Request Letter

Dr. Maria Smith
Superintendent of Schools

Dear Dr. Smith:

As a 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 further understand the connection between student-teacher relationships and student motivation in the upper elementary classroom, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at SRES.

Participants must be fourth, fifth, or sixth grade teachers at SRES who have taught for a minimal of five years and fourth, fifth, or sixth grade students within the classroom of the participating teachers. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a survey at the beginning of the survey which will take 15 minutes. Participants will then take part in an individual interview with myself which will take 30 minutes. Finally, all participants will be invited to attend a focus group for all participants which will take one hour. Data from the surveys, interviews, and focus group will be analyzed to determine patterns and themes found among student-teacher relationships and student motivation. Member checks will be completed at the conclusion of the study. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Amanda King
5th Grade Teacher
Liberty University Doctoral Candidate
Appendix C: School District Permission to Conduct Study

Mrs. Amanda King

Dear Mrs. King:

The purpose of this letter is to grant permission to conduct research at [redacted] School in fulfillment of your requirements for a doctoral degree from the School of Education at Liberty University.

I understand from your letter of request that the purpose of your research is to study the connection between student-teacher relationships and student motivation in the upper elementary classroom. You indicated that participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time. I am satisfied from the overview you presented that you will adhere to strict protocols to protect the confidentiality of all participants.

Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance. Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Superintendent of Schools
Appendix D: Teacher Recruitment Letter

Dear Mr./Mrs.

As a 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 further understand the connection between student-teacher relationships and student motivation in the upper elementary classroom, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be fourth, fifth, or sixth grade teachers who have taught for a minimal of five years and fourth, fifth, or sixth grade students within the classroom of the participating teachers. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a survey at the beginning of the survey which will take 15 minutes. Participants will then take part in an individual interview with myself which will take 30 minutes. Finally, all participants will be invited to attend a focus group for all participants which will take one hour. Data from the surveys, interviews, and focus group will be analyzed to determine patterns and themes found among student-teacher relationships and student motivation. Member checks will be completed at the conclusion of the study. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate, please contact me at. If more than one fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teacher volunteer to be a part of the study the researcher will randomly select a teacher from each grade to participate. Once all participants are identified, pseudonyms will be assigned to protect their identity and privacy.

Sincerely,
Amanda King
5th Grade Teacher
Liberty University Doctoral Candidate
Dear Mr./Mrs.:

As a 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 further understand the connection between student-teacher relationships and student motivation in the upper elementary classroom, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be fourth, fifth, or sixth grade teachers who have taught for a minimal of five years and fourth, fifth, or sixth grade students within the classroom of the participating teachers. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a survey at the beginning of the survey which will take 15 minutes. Participants will then take part in an individual interview with myself which will take 30 minutes. Finally, all participants will be invited to attend a focus group for all participants which will take one hour. Data from the surveys, interviews, and focus group will be analyzed to determine patterns and themes found among student-teacher relationships and student motivation. Member checks will be completed at the conclusion of the study. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to allow your child to participate, please sign and return the attached parental consent document to your child’s teacher. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If more than the needed number of students consent to be a part of the study the researcher will randomly select students to participate. Once all participants are identified, pseudonyms will be assigned to protect their identity and privacy.

Sincerely,

Amanda King
5th Grade Teacher
Liberty University Doctoral Candidate
Appendix G: Parental Consent Form

Parental Consent

**Title of the Project:** A Case Study Examining the Connections between Student-Teacher Relationships and Student Motivation in the Upper Elementary Classroom

**Principal Investigator:** Amanda King, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invitation to be Part of a Research Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your child is invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be in fourth, fifth, or sixth grade. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to allow your child to take part in this research project.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the study about and why are we doing it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The purpose of this case study will be to develop an in-depth understanding of how student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation within the upper elementary classroom. This qualitative study will identify if student-teacher relationships are connected to student motivation in the classroom and how student-teacher relationships can positively and negatively impact student motivation in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What will participants be asked to do in this study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you agree to allow your child be in this study, I would ask him or her to do the following things:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Complete an online survey which will take 15 minutes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher which will take 30 minutes and will be audio recorded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participate in a focus group with the other study participants and the researcher which will take one hour and will be audio recorded.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How could participants or others benefit from this study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Benefits to society include a more in-depth understanding of student-teacher relationships and best practices that school systems and educators can use to improve the quality of classroom climate and school culture.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What risks might participants experience from being in this study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks your child would encounter in everyday life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**How will personal information be protected?**
The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Interviews and the focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Is study participation voluntary?**
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect your or his/her current or future relations with Liberty University or SRES. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he/she is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

**What should be done if a participant wishes to withdraw from the study?**
If you choose to withdraw your child from the study/your child chooses 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 him/her or your child chooses to withdraw, data collected from your child, 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 child’s contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw him/her or your child chooses to withdraw.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**
The researcher conducting this study is Amanda King. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, James Swezey, at jswezey@liberty.edu.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about rights as a research participant?**
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

**Your Consent**
By signing this document, you are agreeing to allow your child to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.
I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record my child as part of his/her participation in this study.

_________________________________________________
Printed Child’s/Student’s Name

_________________________________________________
Parent’s Signature                Date

_________________________________________________
Minor’s Signature                Date
### Appendix H: Audit Trail

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Date</th>
<th>Steps in Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>6/3/2020</td>
<td>Proposal approved with corrections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/10/2020</td>
<td>Proposal defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/16/2020</td>
<td>Approval from school district to conduct research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/20/2020</td>
<td>IRB approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/21/2020 - 8/28/2020</td>
<td>Participant recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/17/2020</td>
<td>Study begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/30/2020</td>
<td>End of data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/1/2020 - 12/31/2020</td>
<td>Data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/1/2021</td>
<td>Start of writing chapter 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/28/2021</td>
<td>Conclusion of writing chapter 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix I: Teacher Survey Questions

1. Describe the community that surrounds your school system.

2. Describe your students. What outside factors impact their academics and motivation?

3. Describe your school system. What programs have been implemented to assist students with unmet physical, physiological, mental, and emotional needs?

4. Describe your classroom culture. What do you intentionally do to build relationships with your students?

5. Describe student success and motivation. What does it mean to you for a student to be motivated and successful in your classroom?
Appendix J: Student Survey Questions

1. Tell about your home. What is it like and how do you feel there?

2. Tell about your family. Who do you live with and what are they like?

3. Tell about your school. What is it like and how do you feel there?

4. Tell about your teacher. What do you like and not like about your teacher?

5. Tell about your feelings. When do you feel happy and when do you feel sad?
Appendix K: Teacher Interview Questions

1. Why did you become a teacher?

2. How would you describe your classroom?

3. How would you describe student motivation within your current classroom?

4. What factors do you think affect student motivation within the classroom?

5. How have you met safety needs of your students and is it important for you to address these needs within your classroom?

6. How have you or your school met basic physiological needs of your students is it important for you to address these needs within your classroom?

7. How have you met mental and emotion needs of your students is it important for you to address these needs within your classroom?

8. How important is the student-teacher relationship?

9. What role, if any, does the student-teacher relationship play within the classroom?

10. What strategies do you use on a daily basis to build relationships with your students?
Appendix L: Student Interview Questions

1. When you think of school what comes to mind?

2. What is your favorite content area (reading, math, science, or social studies) and why?

3. How do you feel when you enter the school building?

4. How do you feel when you enter your classroom?

5. How do you feel when you have to get ready to head home at the end of the school day?

6. What makes you feel safe at school?

7. What makes you feel anxious at school?

8. If you have a favorite teacher, what about them makes them your favorite teacher?

9. How do you know if a teacher cares about you?

10. Why is it important to know your teacher cares about you?
Appendix M: Focus Group Questions

1. How would you describe the climate and culture of your school?

2. What do you feel like when you are in school?

3. What is one thing you would change about your school and why?

4. How would you describe the climate and culture of your classroom?

5. What do you feel like when you are in your classroom?

6. What is one thing you would change about your classroom and why?

7. What factors do you think impact student motivation in the classroom?

8. How do you teachers help and/or provide for their students?

9. What role, if any, does the student-teacher relationship play within the classroom?

10. How important is the student-teacher relationship?