CAUCASIAN TEACHERS’ AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS THAT MOTIVATE LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS TO READ

by

Brittany Keys Anderson

Liberty University

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

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-socioeconomic African American students to read within the southern region of West Virginia. The theories guiding this study were the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). This study details the literature on the achievement gap in reading between African American students and students of other races, as well as teachers’ and students’ perceptions of instructional and motivational practices that influence reading development. African American students from lower economic backgrounds are being left behind in the classroom. In order for these students to make continuous academic improvements, a strong emphasis must be placed on their autonomy, competency levels, and attitudes towards reading. The central research question that guided this study focused on how teachers can cultivate a culturally responsive reading environment to support low-socioeconomic African American students. Approximately 7 teachers and 5 students participated in the study. The students who participated in this study were low-socioeconomic African American students from second through fifth grade, and the teachers who participated in this study were Caucasian and teach from second through fifth grade. A purposeful, homogenous sampling technique was used to select the participants. The methods used for this case study included documentation, interviews, and focus group. The five-step process of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding the data was used for data analysis. Curriculum and teaching, culture, stereotypes, supportive teaching, support systems, and influences were the six identified themes.

Keywords: instructional teaching practices, low-socioeconomic status, reading motivation, academic achievement, African American, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation
Copyright Page
**Dedication**

With God, all things are possible! Thank you to my Lord and Savior for your grace and mercy throughout this process. This manuscript is dedicated to my dad, Wilford Gerald Keys, Jr. My dad is a man of many sacrifices. Throughout my entire life, he has pushed me to be a better person. He has believed in me, even when I felt like giving up on myself. My dad has taught me many things in life, and I will always value his words of wisdom. He has had to overcome many challenges in life. Because of him, I have learned that no matter what may happen in life, you must always keep God first and know that you were placed on Earth for a purpose. My dad will always be my biggest supporter. Thank you, dad, for everything! I hope I have made you proud. I love you!
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There are many people who have been there for me throughout this process. I would like to begin by thanking my husband, RJ Anderson, for his continued love and support throughout this process. RJ, your faith in me from day one has never been taken for granted. I love you and will always be thankful for all you have done for me throughout this process. I would like to thank my son, Asher Anderson. Asher, you inspire me to be a better person. Thank you for all the stickers you have given me throughout this process as encouragement to keep going. You bring me nothing but joy and happiness. Keeping reading those books! Knowledge is power!

Thank you to my mom, Kim Keys. You will never know just how much you mean to me. Your constant prayers have been felt throughout this entire journey. You are my rock, and there will always be something special about our bond. Thank you for being the shoulder I needed to cry on. Thank you to my sisters Shaleana, Keisha, Andrea, and Stefani! We have been through so much as a family, and we have stuck together like glue. Each of you has been such an important part of this journey. You all have cried with me, wiped my tears, and always knew what to say so I would keep going. I am beyond blessed to have you all as sisters.

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List of Abbreviations

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET)
Community Eligible School (CEP)
Concept Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Organismic Integration Theory (OIT)
Self-Determination Theory (SDT)
Socioeconomic Status (SES)
Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Cultivating an environment where students are engaged and equipped with skills necessary for academic growth and development is one of the key elements to bridging the learning gap between students from wealthy backgrounds and students of lower socioeconomic status (SES; Progress 2050, 2017). According to the American Psychological Association (2017), there is a correlation in terms of stratification between race and SES. As a result, communities are often segregated by their SES and race. Segregated communities typically share similar characteristics, such as minimal economic development and low levels of educational attainment (American Psychological Association, 2017). In addition, minority students are more likely to experience multidimensional poverty than Caucasians, which becomes a factor in academic development (Reeves et al., 2016). Minority students who come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are at an educational disadvantage. Educational disadvantages impede the advances that these students may have at earning opportunities and establishing economic security (Reeves et al., 2016). According to Camera (2015), African American students from lower economic backgrounds are being left behind in the classroom.

The motivational and teaching strategies that are used in the classroom to promote reading development are not culturally aligned (Anderson, 2016). Additionally, teachers’ preconceived and biased notions continue to contribute to academic gaps in education (Gershenson et al., 2015). Researchers have found that teachers have significantly lower expectations for the educational attainment levels of minority students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Gershenson et al., 2015). For this reason, it is imperative for educators to understand how to motivate low-SES African American students to read. Teachers
must understand what a culturally responsive classroom looks like to effectively differentiate their instruction (Bowman et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers must be provided with adequate training on approach methods to use when teaching low-SES African American students (Kurdi et al., 2018). Teachers who work towards this type of differentiation will be able to align their teaching practices based upon their students’ curiosity and creativity (Kurdi et al., 2018).

Consequently, this study is beneficial because it explored and determined the effective instructional methods and motivational strategies that teachers are using to teach low-SES African American students how to read. This chapter will provide a summary of historical, social, and theoretical contexts to the reading gap between African American students and other races. Furthermore, it discussed the research problem and purpose statement in addition to the personal significance of the study. Lastly, the final sections of this chapter highlighted the research questions, definitions, as well as a final summary of the chapter.

**Background**

Providing an equitable education for all students is a federal mandate for public schools in the United States (United States Department of Education, 2019). Classrooms are full of students who come from different cultural and economic backgrounds, and all educators must work diligently to implement varying instructional practices so that student learning occurs. Unfortunately, certain factors can prevent low-SES students and minority students from receiving a well-rounded education. Some barriers in education are a direct reflection of teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, whereas others barriers are a result of institutional practices (Cole, 2008). Cultural responsiveness can help increase educational attainments for students (Gershenson & Dee, 2017). Additionally, ensuring that students are able to read on grade level as
well as student motivation are significant factors in increasing a student’s achievement level (McGeown et al., 2016).

**Historical Context**

In the United States, the achievement gap between African American students and other races is significant (Camera, 2015). Historically, achievement data suggest that there is a gap between minority and White students, and statistical evidence suggests that this gap may be widening (Webb & Thomas, 2015). Every year, African American students are entering the next grade level substantially behind other races. As these students get older, the probability of them finding the coursework challenging is high, and there is a greater likelihood they will drop out of school (Camera, 2015). Camera (2015) stated that “on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 18% of African American fourth-graders were proficient in reading” (p. 2). The reading percentage decreased among students in older grades; for instance, only 16% of African American students in eighth grade were proficient in reading (Camera, 2015). The reading proficiency is even lower among African American students who come from a low-SES backgrounds. Gershenson et al. (2015) posited that limited information, incorrect beliefs, and bias continue to contribute to reading and math gaps in education. Furthermore, systematic bias also contributes to achievement gaps and the persistence of socioeconomic gaps within the school system (Gershenson et al., 2015).

It is important to recognize and understand African American culture in regard to student development in education (Bowman et al., 2018). Many African American students who are identified as low-socioeconomic come from backgrounds where their parents or guardians have received a less formal education (Bowman et al., 2018). The history of African American education dates back to the period of slavery. During slavery, educating African Americans was
against the law and was not common. An individual caught assisting African Americans could potentially face prosecution (Virginia Museum of History and Culture, 2019). Even when slavery ended, African Americans still did not have the same rights as other races; they faced numerous social inequalities, such as an injustice of their educational rights (Library of Congress, 2019). Constitutional amendments were enacted in hopes of rectifying the problem; however, many state legislatures enacted laws making racial segregation legally acceptable. This racial segregation included everything from restaurants, bathrooms, water fountains, churches, movie theaters, and school systems (Virginia Museum of History and Culture, 2019). It was not until the case of Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) that the issue of segregation in public schools was addressed. Eventually, all schools were required to integrate (United States Courts, n.d.). Once school systems were integrated, the education of the African American was still limited. Throughout the years, improvements have been made; however, research has shown that, overall, African American children have less access than others to a high-quality education (Camera, 2015).

Progress 2050 (2017) identified additional variables for why there are disparities in education for African American students. These variables include African American students attending high-poverty public schools, disproportionate discipline rates, and lack of diversity amongst teachers. It is more likely for African American students to attend a school system that is located in a high-poverty area. Often, schools within these areas do not have the best resources, or even basic necessities to adequately teach the students they serve (Garcia, 2017). Additional data indicated that “black students are 24% of students enrolled in public schools, yet they make up 48% of students suspended and 49% of students expelled” (Progress 2050, 2017, p. 2). When students are suspended or expelled, it impacts their education. As a result, school
administrators should consider other disciplinary measures to avoid keeping children out of school. The expectations that teachers have of their students are also important. Students will know whether or not their teacher believes in their academic abilities. The perception that teachers have of students must be a positive one, and the diversity of teachers within the school building also matters (Halberstadta et al., 2018). Studies have indicated that Caucasian teachers have lower expectations of their African American students’ academic abilities than a similarly situated African American teacher has for the same student (Progress 2050, 2017). Although this may not be something that Caucasians do intentionally, it does align with the importance of all educators being culturally sensitive to different cultures and backgrounds (Anderson, 2016). Teachers who are culturally sensitive acknowledge diversity and seek to develop students who are globalized thinkers (Gershenson et al., 2015).

As classrooms across America continue to diversify, teachers must be culturally competent. According to the National Education Association (2019b), being culturally competent is a key factor in ensuring educators are effective at teaching students who come from backgrounds that are different from their own. As educators work towards being culturally competent, they must also recognize that unconscious biases do occur (Gershenson & Dee, 2017). The automatic responses that people have towards situations are shaped by their experiences. Teachers must realize that the stereotypes they have about their students, regardless of if they are positive or negative, do affect their teaching practices. Furthermore, Gershenson and Dee (2017) reported that unintentional bias in education does affect students’ academic performance and engagement in the school. Historically, this is particularly true for minority students from low-SES backgrounds. However, student outcomes can be improved when
teachers incorporate racial and ethnic-based curriculum in their classrooms (National Education Association, 2019a).

Social Context

The achievement gap between African American students and students of other races affects the community and economy of the United States (Bowman et al., 2018). Adequate education of all is important if America plans to advance socially and economically (Bowman et al., 2018). Additionally, for a nation to grow, it is necessary to incorporate diverse modes of thinking (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Moreover, it is much more difficult to create equal learning opportunities among students who suffer from generational poverty (Jensen, 2009). How does a teacher motivate a student when the student’s decisions are based solely on their survival and relationship needs? How does a teacher motivate students when their world is defined only in local terms? Teachers must be provided with relevant professional development to help address these issues and effectively align their curriculum with the types of students they are teaching (Halberstadta et al., 2018).

Differentiating instruction is a fundamental part of teaching (United States Department of Education, 2019). Teachers who understand the importance of implementing best teaching practices can help significantly improve any social and academic barriers that low-SES students face (Jensen, 2009). Teachers must keep their teaching practices in mind as they begin to develop their instructional plans; for example, low-income students need explicit and systematic instruction, and all teaching practices must be research-based (Smith et al., 2016). These diverse modes of learning must be considered whenever teachers are designing and developing their lessons. Additionally, this type of learning can be more effective if teachers purposely allow students to explore different ways of knowing (Smith et al., 2016).
Students who come from low-SES backgrounds have specific needs that must be considered whenever they are being taught. Low-SES students see the world in a much smaller spectrum, and they make decisions based upon their survival needs as well as the relationships that they have with others (Jensen, 2009). It is crucial that teachers structure discipline, use cognitive learning strategies, and provide multiple choices for these types of students. Students from low-SES backgrounds need direct teaching and must have a good rapport with the person who is providing the motivation. According to Slavin (2015), a good teacher can “carry out all the tasks involved in good teaching. Warmth, enthusiasm, and caring are essential” (p. 5). This approach will help teachers engage with their low-SES students.

**Theoretical Contexts**

The self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) are two theories that formulate the basis for what teachers must be cognizant of when building reading motivation for low-SES African American students. SDT is a metatheory of human motivation and personality development (Legault, 2018). Children who have intrinsic motivation will eagerly complete an activity for their enjoyment and personal pleasure. Furthermore, SDT provides teachers with the opportunity to observe what a child likes and dislikes (Ciampa, 2016). SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) puts a strong emphasis on an individual’s autonomy and competency level; people want to have new experiences, and they do this by cultivating their needs, desires, and interests. People also achieve their goals by connecting with others and the outside world (Legault, 2018). SDT focuses on the concept that people like to feel as though they are in control of their lives and can make decisions based on their personal preferences (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Intrinsic motivation is the type of motivation that comes from a person’s self-desires. People who have intrinsic motivation are motivated by
their own desires to explore and learn. Extrinsic motivation focuses on outward praise or a tangible prize. Legault (2018) highlighted a mini-theory known as organismic integration theory (OIT). The OIT addresses the need to understand ways in which intrinsic motivation occurs for people who do not find a skill enjoyable or interesting. Therefore, the concept of relatedness comes into effect. For behaviors to become internalized, the individual must feel autonomous and competent (Legault, 2018). If educators plan to create environments that are intrinsically motivating, they must understand the child’s autonomy and capitalize on the experiences and cultures of their students during reading instruction (Gagné & Deci, 2005). OIT can have a significant impact on the development of a child. According to Deci and Ryan (1980), self-determination behaviors are “mindless or automated behaviors that require less involvement of the higher cerebral function” (p. 3).

The SDT’s concept of relatedness is an important factor in the social development of a child. If people want to achieve psychological growth, they must feel as though they have a sense of connection to others (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Two individuals must be able to relate and connect to develop a relationship that consists of mutual respect. El-Mekki (2017) emphasized the influence educators have on their African American students. El-Mekki reiterated that teachers who are working with African American students must be curious, respectful, and knowledgeable about Black culture and must maintain a high level of humility. Relatedness can occur between African American students and their teachers as long as the relationship is nurturing and the students’ feel accepted and feel free to be their authentic self (Legault, 2018). Equally important, people only seek out positive relationships with people who are going to support their goals (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Therefore, educators working with African American students must be willing to work towards having a much deeper understanding of racial history
and ongoing racial matters (Mills, 2019). Furthermore, people who have high self-determination will engage in actions that will bring them closer to their goals (Ryan & Deci, 1980). As a result, educators must be willing to ask themselves difficult questions about what they are doing to ensure they are relating to the students in their classroom. Educators who are unable to have a deep connection and understand their students’ culture will be less likely to help students reach their goals in the classroom.

Deci and Ryan explained that intrinsic motivation comes from three basic psychological human needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Other researchers have worked with Deci and Ryan (1980) to refine and advance their research. Gagné and Deci (2005) completed a research review of the cognitive evaluation theory. The cognitive evaluation theory is a subtheory of the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980). The cognitive evaluation theory seeks to understand how internal and external forces affect people (Legault, 2018). Social and environmental conditions can affect a person’s intrinsic motivation. The cognitive evaluation theory suggests that the type of feedback, communication, and rewards that are used can affect the level of competency that a person feels (Legault, 2018). People who feel competent at completing a task can experience enhanced intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, an individual’s intrinsic motivation can also be undermined depending upon external factors. External factors can be in the form of punishers or criticisms (Legault, 2018).

Gagné and Deci (2005) were able to determine that the “self-determination theory has detailed the processes through which extrinsic motivation can become autonomous, and research suggests that intrinsic motivation (based on interest) and autonomous extrinsic motivation (based on importance) are both related to performance, satisfaction, trust, and well-being” (p. 26). The SDT’s broad framework for understanding motivation is important if teachers plan to help their
students reach optimal levels of motivation and engagement (Legault, 2018). In the school system, students are motivated intrinsically by their core values, belief systems, and well-being. Educators who create intrinsically motivating environments emphasize the child’s autonomy and capitalize on the experiences and cultures of their students during reading instruction. However, extrinsic motivation can undermine intrinsic motivation, making the cognitive evaluation theory controversial (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Teachers who understand the cognitive evaluation theory can significantly impact the development of their students through their teaching practices.

The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) is a theory that focuses on linking beliefs with behaviors. The fundamental concepts of this theory are behavioral intentions, attitudes towards behaviors, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control. Additionally, this theory distinguishes positive and negative behaviors in reference to social pressures, the person’s ability to complete a task, and self-efficacy (Ajzen, 1991). When an individual is in favor of doing something, there is a higher probability that the task will be performed correctly. Additionally, the extent to which a person feels able to enact a certain behavior will also have an impact on the way that others complete the task (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1970). TPB suggests that the students must have some interest in the assignment or lesson for the teacher to receive favorable results (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1970). Ajzen (1991) believed that teachers who are developing lessons for their students must also consider the outcomes of the behavior. The TPB “incorporates some of the central concepts in the social and behavior sciences, and it defines these concepts in a way that permits prediction and understanding of particular behaviors in specified contexts” (Ajzen, 1991, pg. 212).
Situation to Self

I grew up in southern West Virginia in a predominantly White area. Throughout my educational journey, I noticed there were very few African American students who set high academic goals and expectations for themselves. Many of these students struggled academically and did not take honors or advanced courses. Through conversations, I learned that many of my African American peers also lacked self-confidence in the area of academics. Throughout high school and college, I began to see disparities in education firsthand; however, at the time, I was unsure of how to process this information. When I began teaching, I noticed that this cycle continued. I taught in a predominately White area, and the majority of the students I taught were from low-SES backgrounds. One of the main differences was that the majority of the African American students from low-SES backgrounds were substantially behind their classmates. I only taught at this school for 3 years before I transferred to a school where more than 70% of the students were African American and economically disadvantaged. Once again, I found that this school was substantially behind other schools within the district.

Four years ago, I became the principal at a school in the same area. I continued to read articles and literature that suggested that unintentional institutional racism is present within school systems. As an African American principal, I felt that it was my due diligence to help understand this phenomenon. I currently evaluate teachers based on their instructional practices, and I believe several variables contribute to African American students’ lower academic performance. I believe that educators must have honest conversations about what is occurring in their school systems. Additionally, educators who evaluate literature and adopt curriculums must ensure that they are not targeting a specific race. Educators must also ensure that standardized tests are not culturally biased and that there is an adequate representation of all races. Lastly, I
believe that educators must be culturally responsive and take time to understand the backgrounds of their students and students’ families.

Philosophical assumptions are important for qualitative research. The axiological, ontological, and epistemological assumptions guided my research and helped in the development of the theories that I choose to use for my study. The first philosophical assumption that guided my research was the axiological assumption. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the axiological assumption is when researchers position themselves in relation to the context and setting of the research. The data collected from the research study may represent an interpretation of myself as well as the participants in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As an African American and an educator, I have a personal connection to this research study. Because there are biases in axiological assumptions, it is important that I also share my own values and interpretation along with the participants. I believe that it is important to ensure that instructional practices presented in the classroom meet all students at their point of social, emotional, or academic need. I can only recount a few times throughout my educational journey where African American literature was embedded into the curriculum. Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss critical race theory and how it relates to research. I conducted this research with the hope of empowering teachers to help bridge the gap between inequalities that exist in education. In addition, engaging in conversations regarding the achievement gap in reading between African Americans and other students may help teachers better interpret social actions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because there is an achievement gap between African Americans and other races, I feel that I have due diligence to explore what motivational reading strategies are the most effective. The goal of this research was to help bridge the achievement gap and draw awareness to effective instructional approaches used to teach low-SES African American students.
The second philosophical assumption that guided my research was the ontological assumption. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the ontological assumption is when the researchers report multiple perspectives as different themes develop in the findings. Throughout this research study, teachers and students shared their perspectives on reading motivation. There were multiple realities to consider as data were collected. The teachers whom I interviewed had different levels of expertise and experiences. Additionally, teachers’ understanding of their cultural biases may have affected how they recounted their experiences of motivating and teaching low-SES students how to read. The students whom I interviewed also had different viewpoints based on their experiences. The teachers’ and students’ responses were subjective. The participants view their experiences differently, and researchers should report accordingly (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The third philosophical assumption that guided my research was the epistemological assumption. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the epistemological assumption occurs when subjective evidence is obtained from the participants. I conducted interviews and a focus group to obtain direct quotes that were used as evidence. I spent adequate time with participants during the interviews and focus group, which helped me gain insight into the field.

The four paradigms that guide qualitative research studies are postpositivism, social constructivism, transformative, and pragmatism. The paradigm that guided this study was pragmatism. A framework based on pragmatism focuses on the actions of research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal of this research study was to determine if there were instructional strategies and motivational strategies that helped motivate low-SES students, and I used multiple sources of data as a means to understand important aspects of the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pragmatist researchers look to determine the what and how of research; in this
study, I aimed to determine effective instructional and motivation strategies for low-SES African American students as well as how to ensure that African American students are achieving at the same levels as other students.

**Problem Statement**

The achievement gap in reading between African American students and other races persists (Bowman et al., 2018). Lack of reading development has a major impact on students as they progress through school; for example, students who start kindergarten behind their counterparts have a higher chance of dropping out of high school, and their chances of attending an institution of higher learning decreases (Children’s Reading Foundation, 2020). Because reading development plays a major role in education, teachers must be cognizant of effective motivational strategies.

Within the teaching population, 84% of teachers are White and only 7% are Black (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). African American students benefit from collaborative learning from people who understand their cultural background; thus, it is imperative to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions that Caucasian teachers have in regard to motivating and teaching low-SES students how to read. Additionally, it is important that African American students’ perceptions are also explored to determine if the motivational strategies that are used to teach them to read are relevant to their learning styles. If African American students are not provided the same level of education as other races, there will continue to be an achievement gap among races and social classes (Camera, 2015). Moreover, there is a need to research the instructional practices and motivational strategies that are effective in motivating low-SES African American students to read. The National Assessment of Educational Progress indicates that African American students are performing at lower rates than other races (Camera, 2015).
The reading proficiency is even lower for African American students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Bowman et al., 2018).

Current research suggests that African American children who enter preschool and kindergarten with limited language and vocabulary broaden the achievement gap (Bowman et al., 2018). As a result, teaching these students how to read and write becomes even more challenging. Establishing a strong reading foundation during the early years of a child’s life is necessary for successful reading development (Schüller et al., 2016); therefore, teachers must be able to identify struggling readers early to provide appropriate interventions (Kurdi et al., 2018).

Parkay et al. (2014) stated that “to educate children as future citizens with higher-order thinking and better literacy, learning must be more than the input-output suggests” (p. 243). Unfortunately, minimal research focuses on instructional and motivation strategies that teachers could use to help low-SES African American students. Schools should be a place where students make different discoveries of life based on their interests. Students who struggle to read, in addition to being African American and from a lower social class, are faced with an even more serious problem than their peers (Bowman et al., 2018). This research study explored the perceptions that teachers have in motivating low-SES African American students to read. Additionally, it explored the perceptions that African American students have about factors that motivate them to read.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students in the southern region of West Virginia to read. For the current study, motivation was defined as the desire or willingness for a person to complete a task. The theories guiding this study were the
SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991). For low-SES African American students to make continuous academic improvements, a strong emphasis must be placed on their autonomy and competency levels. Teachers who are culturally responsive to the needs of their students are more equipped to motivate their students. The ability to motivate students helps increase the students’ self-determination.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it revealed ways to bridge the reading gap between races. Students’ ability to read is an essential component to ensuring equitable learning for all students (United States Department of Education, 2019). Teachers must ensure that they demonstrate cultural competency within their classrooms as they working towards building students’ reading skills (Anderson, 2016). Studies have been conducted to determine effective ways to educate and motivate students from low-SES backgrounds; however, there is limited research regarding low-SES African American students. Isik et al. (2018) studied and compiled a comprehensive review of factors that influence the motivation of minority students. These influences were based on the students’ perspectives and viewpoints. Isik et al. found that the main factors that contributed to academic motivation were the students, teachers, instructional materials, and classroom learning environments. Isik et al. hypothesized that minority students who are motivated to learn would improve their academic performance. The literature that the authors reviewed supported this hypothesis.

Teachers are the guiding force in building the academic skills of their students. As a country, attempts have been made to ensure that institutional racism does not occur; however, data show that African Americans are still continuing to perform at lower standards than other races (Camera, 2015). Van Rijk et al. (2018) conducted a research study to analyze the effects of
developmental education on reading achievement for low-SES minority students. Van Rijk et al. found that the innovative developmental education approach is as suitable for students from ethnic minority or low-SES families as the traditional programmatic instructional approach. Further, Van Rijk et al. suggested that teaching strategies should be based upon the students’ personality and interests. Van Rijk et al.’s study findings imply that teachers must be reflective enough to recognize their African American students’ personalities and interests. Recognizing effective ways to motivate African American students to read lends to data-driven professional development for teachers who work with African American students. Inequalities continue to occur within school systems; these inequalities affect achievement and opportunity gaps for African American students (Anderson, 2016). Data on effective motivational and teaching strategies may help decrease the learning gaps that occur between races in education.

Everyone has a perception of how the world works. These perceptions are often based upon experiences (Beegle, 2017). Caucasian teachers who have a completely different background than their low-SES African American students will not understand how to be culturally responsive. As a result, the achievement gap will continue to widen. It is imperative for teachers to develop a dialogue that will help them understand their students (Anderson, 2016). Understanding how to respond to the cultural aspects of low-SES African American students helps create learning environments where students can thrive based upon their own experiences and perceptions. Teachers need to capitalize on these experiences to help their students feel a sense of belonging within the classroom (Ryan & Deci, 2019).

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students to read within
the southern region of West Virginia. The research questions are focused on the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980), the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), and the achievement gap in reading between African Americans and other races, as well as teachers’ and students’ perceptions of instructional and motivational practices that influence reading development.

**Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 states, “What instructional strategies and methods are teachers using to build the motivational levels of their students?” The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) suggests that individuals are more motivated when they recognize the effects that their choices will have on their life. Therefore, students will be more apt to grow if their environment is conducive to their needs. As a result, meeting the psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy for students is imperative (Ryan & Deci, 1980). For students to excel, they must be able to relate and connect to the task they are completing; this connectedness will help students develop their intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 1980). The concept of autonomous motivation helps students relate to the activities’ value and recognize how the activities align with their sense of self (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Self-directed learning will occur when teachers are able to build their students’ autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 1980).

**Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 states, “What methods are teachers using to link their student’s beliefs with the desired behavioral outcomes?” Ajzen (1991) determined that an individual’s intent to engage in a behavior is based on the value that they see in completing the task. Ciampa (2016) examined how choice, curiosity, and challenges empower students. To predict what students are going to do, teachers must recognize the behaviors they see in their classroom. A
person’s attitude builds their belief system (Ajzen, 1991). Teachers must have a positive attitude about reading development if they plan to create and deliver impactful lessons to students.

**Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 states, “What factors contribute to low-SES African American students’ success in reading?” This question explores the research that suggests that achievement gaps exist between African American students and students of other races. Conversations in education must occur to help strengthen policies that will fundamentally change the crisis that African American students are facing (Anderson, 2016). Low-SES students’ communities affect their overall well-being. The factors then contribute to inequalities in education (Bowman et al., 2018). To equip teachers with the skills necessary to teach low-SES African American students, teacher must first understand the diverse perspectives of African American communities (Anderson, 2016). The culture of poverty, cognitive readiness, and relationship building all contribute to the achievement gap (Camera, 2015).

**Research Question 4**

Research Question 4 states, “How could teachers cultivate a reading environment where they are culturally responsive and can support low-SES African American students?” The classroom must also be a place where students feel safe to express their concerns and opinions freely without judgment (Hornstra et al., 2015). Researchers have provided strong evidence that supports the idea that students need to have a sense of fulfillment whenever they are presented with tasks within the classroom (Kurdi et al., 2018). Additionally, providing a strong reading foundation during the early years of a child’s life is imperative (Schüller et al., 2016). Teachers must be able to identify struggling readers early to provide appropriate interventions (Kurdi et al., 2018). Being mindful of the communities where low-SES students come from is one of the
first steps to building relationships and providing students and their families with social and emotional support (Anderson, 2016).

**Research Question 5**

Research Question 5 states, “What are Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of effective instructional and motivational strategies?” Extrinsic motivation helps to set the foundation for developing students’ interests (McGeown et al., 2016). Additionally, learning environments must encourage and promote autonomy to help build students’ intrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Kurdi et al. (2018) and Ciampa (2016) highlighted effective strategies that teachers can implement in their classrooms to engage students in the reading process as well as motivate them to read. Providing students with a variety of options increases the likelihood of student success. Biyak et al. (2017) examined motivational reading strategies for primary students, and Boyce et al. (2014) investigated how getting students outside and using technology helps stimulate student learning and reading engagement. The effects that teachers have on their students is an additional determining factor on student success (Kurdi et al., 2018). Konstantopoulos (2014) examined the effects that teachers have on minority students who are disadvantaged, and Kurdi et al. explored how need-supportive teaching practices are important for low-SES students.

**Definitions**

1. **Culturally responsive** – Recognizing the importance of embedding a person’s culture into the learning environment (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018).

2. **Extrinsic motivation** – Completing a task for outward praise or a tangible reward (Deci & Ryan, 1980).
3. *Intrinsic motivation* – Completing a task for personal fulfillment (Deci & Ryan, 1980).

4. *SDT* – A theory that links personality, motivation, and well-being that determines a person’s tendencies and psychological needs satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 1980).

5. *SES* - The social standing of an individual or a group (Jensen, 2009).

6. *TPB* – A theory designed to predict when a person will engage in a behavior and explain why the person has the ability to exert self-control (Ajzen, 1991).

**Summary**

It is important that all students are part of a dynamic and engaging learning environment so that learning transpires. Motivating low-SES African American students to read requires one to understand the culture of the students on a much deeper level (Anderson, 2016). Each child who enters a classroom has different needs that must be met. If these needs are not met, the likelihood of student learning occurring will be minimal. It is necessary that additional research is conducted to address the achievement gap in reading between low-SES African American students and students of other races.

It is important to recognize how behavior and cultural barriers are related to African American students (Camera, 2015). Every day, teachers work diligently to provide equal learning opportunities for all of their students; however, it becomes much more difficult to provide equal learning opportunities when teaching minority students who are victims of generational poverty (Jensen, 2009). Through understanding the importance of implementing best teaching practices that align directly with students, teachers may help significantly improve any social and academic barriers that low-SES minority students face.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students to read in the southern region of West Virginia. This chapter consists of four major sections: an overview, the theoretical framework of the study, related literature, and a summary. The first section discusses the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991). The second section provides a synthesis of existing literature related to the research topics. This section highlights different aspects of reading development and motivation as it relates to a child’s curiosity, creativity, and technology integration. The literature review explored classroom environments and supportive teaching for low-SES students, teacher effectiveness, reading development, and social disparities as they relate to the instruction of African American students. The final section of this chapter includes a focused summary of the literature.

Theoretical Framework

The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) are two theories that align closely with behaviors and motivation. The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students to read within the southern region of West Virginia. The theoretical approach that this study is based upon is the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991). These theories helped guide the study so that the phenomena could be understood in a broader framework.
**The SDT**

The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) is an approach to motivation and personality that is used to highlight the importance of humans’ personality development and self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Richard Ryan and Edward Deci were the originators of the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980), and the theory focused on the strategic concept that behavior principles and intellectual consistencies are what account for behavioral phenomena (Ryan & Deci, 2019). The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) originated when the concepts of intrinsic motivation and natural propensity were explored (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Within the first decade of the origin of the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980), the framework for development was on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2019). The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) has expanded its focus on individual differences in motivation. Additionally, the theory has been integrated into broader frameworks of research (Ryan & Deci, 2019). According to Legault (2018), the SDT has been broken into the following mini-theories: cognitive evaluation theory, OIT, causality orientations theory, basic psychological need theory, goal content theory, and relationship motivation theory. The six mini-theories highlight human behavior as they related to work, relationships, education, religion, sports, and stereotyping and prejudice (Legault, 2018).

**The TPB**

The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) is a social-psychological theory that focuses on decision-making behaviors (Zhang, 2018) and is derived from the multiattribute attitude and the theory of reasoned action (Zhang, 2018). The major difference between the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) and the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) is that the TPB examines the perceived behavior controls of the individual (Notani, 1998). According to Zhang (2018), the TPB states that the behavioral intentions of people are determined by an individual’s attitude and subjective
norms, which are formed from positive and negative societal influences. The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) allowed researchers to predict behaviors of individuals based upon their attitude toward the behavior in addition to the intentions behind the behavior (Notani, 1998). If an individual has control over what they are doing, then they are more likely to develop strong intentions to perform the behaviors (Notani, 1998).

**The Theories and Literature Advancement**

The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) both have a direct correlation to the research study. The SDT aligns closely with understanding how motivation relates to an individual’s feelings of competency, psychological relatedness, and autonomy. The TPB focused on behavior and attitudes towards certain concepts. These theories can be applied to the current literature to further explain Caucasian teachers’ and low-SES African American students’ perceptions about reading motivation.

*The SDT*

The ability to read continues to be a skill taught in classrooms across the world (Casangiu & Norel, 2019). Being able to motivate students to read independently requires teachers to know the types of students they have, as well as their students’ skill set (Simeral & Hall, 2015). Studies showed that reading engages the mind more than television shows or computer games (Casangiu & Norel, 2019). The SDT’s (Deci & Ryan, 1980) central focus is on feelings of competency, psychological relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For some students, being self-motivated to complete a task does not come naturally. Additionally, environmental factors can affect one’s motivation level (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) suggests that people will become more apt to do something whenever their needs of competence, connection, and autonomy are met (Ryan & Deci, 2019).
Currently, African American students are entering preschool and kindergarten behind students of other races due to their lack of resources and SES (Camera, 2015). The initial reading competency of a child is correlated with the home literacy environment, the number of books in the house, and parents’ educational background (Bergen et al., 2017). Students from low-SES households have less access to educational materials, which makes it difficult for parents to establish a positive literacy environment. Therefore, the achievement gap in education for African American students and students of other races begins early. It is important that teachers understand the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) because the theory helps equip teachers with concepts needed to increase students’ psychological well-being and growth. Increasing students’ psychological well-being and growth are key factors in motivating students to become proficient readers. Teachers must help students gain mastery of reading skills by helping them understand why these skills are necessary for future success. Helping children understand why reading skills are necessary is not only important for this child, but it is an important concept for the child’s parents or guardians. Ryan and Deci (2019) believed that as people master specific skills, their motivation to complete a related task will increase. Therefore, students need to be in classrooms where they feel like they belong.

People need to experience a sense of belonging and connectedness to other people (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Building positive relationships and interactions with others is an integral part of the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) because these relationships help encourage personal growth among others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As personal growth is established, people start to feel comfortable having control over their behaviors and goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). To build independent readers, teachers must help their students personalize their learning. Many teachers use extrinsic motivators such as prizes to help motivate their students to read; however, it is
important that teachers work towards helping their students understand the intrinsic benefits of being a successful reader (Schwabe et al., 2015). People who feel like they have control over their actions feel more empowered and have a greater sense of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Teachers can use the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) in the classroom to encourage students who are motivated to fix their own mistakes take action to correct their behaviors.

**The TPB**

The Black community has always strived to ensure that there is equality of opportunity and access for African American students because they know it is the key to social mobility and economic independence (Anderson, 2016). African American students who enter preschool or kindergarten from low-SES backgrounds do not have the same advantages as students of other races. Limited advantages for African American students put them at risk of advancing at lower rates (Anderson, 2016). The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) places a strong emphasis on human behavior as it relates to objective circumstances rather than circumstances that the individual controls (Zhang, 2018). Ajzen (1991) believed that the TPB’s main component is behavioral intent, which is influenced by the perceptions that a person has regarding the likelihood that the behavior will have a positive impact on the outcome. Six concepts represent a person’s control of behavior: (a) attitudes, (b) behavioral intention, (c) subjective norms, (d) social norms, (e) perceived power, and (f) perceived behavioral control. All of these constructs correlate to how teachers can motivate their low-SES African American students to read. In order to change behavioral intentions, these concepts must be understood (Ryan & Deci, 2019).

Creating an environment where students want to be actively involved in the learning process is one of the main goals of teaching (Simeral & Hall, 2015). Developing positive attitudes within the classroom and towards reading helps increase reading motivation. Building
students’ motivation, whether extrinsically or intrinsically, helps increase the likelihood that students will perform the required behavior (Ajzen, 1991). According to Zhang (2018), the decision-making process focuses on attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control. Reading development correlates with students’ interest and their motivation levels (Schüller et al., 2016), and the relationships between a child’s reading behavior and behavioral beliefs have been investigated for years (Miesen, 2003). Additionally, the culture that teachers create in the classroom towards reading development can impact student learning (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018); in other words, the attitude that teachers create towards reading development can have a positive or negative behavioral outcome for students (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1970). If teachers want to motivate their low-SES African American students to read, they must get to the root of recognizing the unique cultural aspects and interests of their low-SES African American students. Reading is the gateway for success in other areas of academics; thus, reading development is one way to help narrow the reoccurring achievement gap in education (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018).

Related Literature

The related literature section contains a synthesis of literature that relates to the following themes: reading motivation, low-SES students, and African American students. It is imperative to accurately understand the different variables that help low-SES African American students thrive in the classroom. The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) both have foundational constructs that can be used to help build motivation and positive behavioral intentions within the classroom.

The achievement gap in education between African American students and students of other races continues to grow (Bowman et al., 2018). In order to narrow the achievement gap, it
is important to recognize the perceptions that Caucasian teachers and African American students have regarding motivating low-SES African American students to read. Camera (2015) identified that one of the reasons for the achievement gap is due to low-SES African American students’ low engagement in the learning environment. Bowman et al. (2018) believed that teachers must be culturally responsive to the needs of their low-SES African American students to understand the motivational strategies that are most effective. The reviewed literature provides a synthesis of developmentally appropriate instructional and motivational practices that have been researched and found to be effective when teaching low-SES students and African American students. Additionally, the literature helps fill the gaps that are present within this study that has not been examined.

**Increasing Reading Motivation through Engagement**

The ability to motivate students to read is challenging, but it is an achievable goal (Casangiu & Norel, 2019). Teachers must not only use a systematic and explicit reading approach and take time to consider the type of students in their classroom. Unfortunately, the current demands in education make this an increasingly difficult task to do. Deci and Ryan (1980) discussed the effects that positive relationships and connections have on others. However, when there is a rise in mental health issues amongst students and class sizes are increased, the ability for teachers to make meaningful connections decreases. Anderson (2016) highlighted the importance of reforming education for African American students by engaging students through community efforts. Additionally, providing African American students with culturally resonant representation in the classroom may help close achievement and opportunity gaps (Anderson, 2016). Sadly, the recruitment efforts from human resource departments within school systems in
rural areas are very minimal. Recruitment of teachers outside of localized and predominantly White areas must take place to recruit teachers who resonate with their students.

Schwabe et al. (2015) found that a child’s intrinsic motivation to read correlates with higher achievement test scores. Teachers can build students’ intrinsic motivation by providing students the ability to choose and direct their learning (Ciampa, 2016); however, districts mandate that their teachers follow certain curriculums. The development of a standards-based education was built on the premise that all students are capable of meeting high standards regardless of their background (Parkay et al., 2014). This approach is one of the reasons why there is both criticism and support in regard to standards-based education. Individuals who support higher standards for curriculum believe that an ideal learning environment exists when educators can cultivate an atmosphere where all students can grow and reach mastery. These individuals also believe that a standards-based education is appropriate because it defines what is to be taught as well as the type of performance that is expected (Parkay et al., 2014). Establishing equity in all schools is also a major component of standards-based education. Individuals who oppose higher standards for curriculum believe that a standards-based education creates a bias in education. Instead of encompassing all students, there are “opportunities in favor of students from advantaged backgrounds, intensify the class-based structure of American society, and increase the disparities between rich and poor schools” (Parkay et al., 2014, p. 303). Because students from advantaged backgrounds would benefit from a standards-based education, there is a belief that political groups are using this approach to keep underrepresented students from making educational gains.

The demands in education make the flexibility of teaching difficult. Bowman et al. (2018) reported that, on average, African American students score lower on tests than students of
other races. Although many African American students progress through high school, they do not seek to challenge themselves by enrolling in honors courses or even continuing their education by going to college (Bowman et al., 2018). Additionally, African American males are wrongfully placed in special education when they do not make adequate gains in education like their classmates (National Education Association, 2019a). Thus, traditional mindsets in education must be discussed to appropriately reform education.

Students must feel that they have ownership in what they are learning to master the content that is taught. Often, teachers are more comfortable having control over their classrooms as opposed to taking a step back and letting their students take ownership over what they are learning; however, developing ownership leads to engagement and behavioral intentions, as described by Ajzen’s (2019) TPB. Furthermore, the autonomy level and competence of a child affects their level of engagement. Various motivational strategies can be embedded in the classroom as a means to help students become proficient at reading. An initial step that teachers can take to understand and relate to the children they teach is to think about their own culture and life experiences (Bowman et al., 2019). Another way to increase reading motivation and engagement is to allow students to capitalize on their experiences and interest because it enhances their curiosity and creativity (Ciampa, 2016).

**Curiosity and Creativity**

Teachers can use several instructional strategies to pique the curiosity and interest of their students (Ciampa, 2016). One of the ways to ensure that this occurs is for teachers to take the time to learn the interest levels of their students as well as the identifying factors that make students do certain things (Biyik et al., 2017). Biyik et al. (2017) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) highlight the significance that behavioral outcomes can have on human behavior. As reading
behaviors become more prevalent in the classroom, it becomes even more important to identify the interest level of students to determine how to integrate choice into the learning environment (Ciampa, 2016). Students are more motivated to learn when the choices they make align with their experiences and help cultivate a sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 1980). The motivational strategies that teachers use needs to be organized in such a way that allows their students to build upon their experiences. When it comes to reading, there are factors tied to a child’s intrinsic motivation. These aspects include curiosity, choice, and preference for a challenge (Ciampa, 2016). Children who are provided with the opportunity to explore a topic that piques their curiosity are going to be motivated intrinsically to learn as much as they can about the topic. Although Ciampa (2016) highlighted the importance of encouraging choice, their study does not indicate if the children were more motivated by the books they read because of their own personal preference or if they were motivated due to the praise and attention they received from their teacher.

The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that students are more likely to complete a task whenever they feel the task is achievable. Therefore, as teachers are developing reading lessons, they must understand how the types of books chosen affects the outcome of the desired behavior (Ciampa, 2016). In Ciampa’s (2016) study, it was determined that students want a challenge; however, teachers must be careful not to make the task too difficult because it could deter some students from completing the task. Ciampa’s (2016) study is an example of how the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) can be beneficial in the classroom. Simeral and Hall (2015) discussed the difference between students learning a skill and being able to implement the skill effectively. When students recognize why something must be done, they will be able to engage in deep, continuous thought about the skill. Learning how to read starts with foundational skills, and the application
piece follows. Students must recognize that the outcome of knowing how to read is more important than just simply knowing how to do it (Simeral & Hall, 2015).

In the elementary school setting, gender, class, and SES contribute to reading motivation. Biyik et al. (2017) found that the gender and social class of students determined the way they valued reading. Students who came from a higher social class were more motivated to read than students who came from a lower social class (Biyik et al., 2017). One factor that should be considered when analyzing Biyak et al.’s study is the type of literature that the students were reading. If the students from a higher social class were reading books that relate to their social or economic well-being, they would be more motivated to read the books. Consequently, if lower-class students were asked to read books that they did not have a connection with, they would not be as motivated to read. The theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) provides an additional explanation for how educators can help narrow the achievement gap between social classes. Children who come from high social classes receive cultural capital from their parents, and this gateway helps lead them to educational achievement success (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). Parents can provide their children with cultural capital by sharing knowledge, skills, and privilege that comes from being a part of a higher social class. Bourdieu (1977) believed that cultural capital can be acquired through formal schooling, where teachers play a pivotal role in helping to level the playing field between students from different social classes (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). This information is a precursor to understanding the instructional practices teachers must implement into their classroom to motivate low-SES students to read. Once a child has reached the level of being motivated intrinsically, there is a higher probability that they will begin reading recreationally (McGeown et al., 2016).
Technology Integration

Teachers can use technology to increase student engagement and maximize students’ interest levels. According to Blau and Shamir-inbal (2017), “One of the most important manifestations of teacher’s professional knowledge is the ability to adjust existing teaching activities to the curriculum and to design new artifacts such as technology-enhanced activities according to pedagogical goals and student needs” (p. 770). Ciampa (2016) conducted a preliminary study to investigate the effects of mobile eBooks on beginning readers’ intrinsic reading motivation. Ciampa analyzed the perceived effects that choice, challenge, and curiosity had on the participants’ motivation to read eBooks. The results from the questionnaires indicated that most of the participants enjoyed answering eBook comprehension questions and preferred using eBooks over print books. The study demonstrated that (a) integrating technology into the classroom is an effective teaching practice and (b) technology not only motivates students, but also helps teachers motivate their students to think more critically. Students are more likely to be engaged whenever mobile technologies are integrated into various subject areas (Blau & Shamir-inbal, 2017). Ciampa’s study indicated that the students preferred using eBooks over print books; however, the study did not include how this implementation would work for school systems that do not have access to modern technology. School systems with limited resources would not be able to implement this strategy in their classroom, which could continue to increase the achievement gap in education.

The implementation of technology into school systems does have positive effects; however, it is also important to consider the type of technology that is being integrated. Instead of teachers competing with technology, they are more likely to have student participation and full engagement if they foster the true integration of technology (Boyce et al., 2014). Researchers
have also conducted studies to determine how technologies impact student learning. Cheng et al. (2013) investigated how elementary school students accepted technology whenever digital game-based learning was applied in their classroom. Cheng et al.’s study results indicated that students are more likely to complete their work and have a greater sense of achievement when they are interested in using a computer and are exposed to digital game-based learning. Integrating technology into the classroom is an effective teaching practice (Boyce et al., 2014). Pedagogical approaches to using technology allow for digital literacies that are interactive. Previous research has indicated that learning by merely using paper and pencil adds to cultural-deficit representations that currently exist in education (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). Embedding culture from students’ home and communities, such as digital storytelling, spoken word poetry, and hip-hop, help to dismantle cultural-deficit representations (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018).

**Reading Motivation and Ethnicity**

Theoretical models such as the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 1980) reveal that children’s beliefs, values, and goals drive their motivation (Wigfield et al., 2016). Students must feel as though they have a sense of control over what they are learning. Additionally, students must feel that they will be successful at the task they are doing to have the motivation to complete it (Wigfield et al., 2016). Ryan and Deci (1980) found that building a child’s intrinsic motivation has better long-term success than building their extrinsic motivation (Wigfield et al., 2016).

The reading gap in education between African American students and students of other races has caused teachers to be more conscientious of how they approach literacy in the classroom (Thomas, 2018). Wigfield et al. (2016) posited that African American students report higher levels of intrinsic motivation and value of reading than their counterparts; however, African American students continue to perform at much lower rates on reading outcome
measures. Wigfield et al.’s research led Guthrie and Wigfield to develop Concept Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI), a set of instructional practices that focus on reading motivation. These instructional practices focus on increasing motivation by building students’ self-efficacy, autonomy, and social interactions around reading development (Wigfield et al., 2016). The CORI process is an example of how teachers can adopt a culturally responsive approach to literacy that has a positive effect on students’ motivation (Thomas, 2018). It would seem logical that school systems with diverse learners would use an approach similar to the CORI when working with African American students; however, it is often left up to the teacher to determine when such an approach is necessary. Teachers often have difficulty knowing how to embed processes like CORI into their daily instructional practices because most school systems want a systematic and explicit approach to teaching reading.

**Low-SES Students**

Low-SES students are often at a disadvantage when it comes to learning how to read (Cook, 2016). Students from low-SES families are less likely to have positive experiences that encourage the development of fundamental reading acquisition skills, such as phonological awareness, vocabulary, and oral language (Buckingham et al., 2013). Many low-SES students see the world in a much smaller spectrum and make decisions based on their survival needs as well as the relationships that they have with others (Bowman et al., 2018). It is imperative that teachers structure discipline, use cognitive learning strategies, and provide multiple choices for these types of students. Students from low-SES backgrounds need direct teaching and need to have a relationship with the person who is providing the motivation (Anderson, 2016). Many of these students lack developmental reading skills and are not raised in a literacy-rich environment,
which makes it increasingly more difficult for them to demonstrate reading proficiency (Anderson, 2016).

Being mindful of the development levels of students plays a vital role in their level of motivation and engagement. The developmental levels of students depend greatly on how well a student’s biological and psychological needs are met (Parkay et al., 2014). Understanding a student’s biological and psychological needs means that teachers must be well versed on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and how it relates to the whole child (Fisher & Crawford, 2020). Teachers must understand the needs and desires of the child to motivate and teach low-SES students. Low-SES students must have particular needs satisfied before they can engage in the classroom. These needs can be anywhere from physiological to feeling loved and accepted. Additionally, teachers need to understand that children learn through trial and error; their behavior is based on their experiences. Teachers who understand these behaviors and needs will be able to understand the necessary steps it takes to motivate these students in the classroom.

Some teachers have preconceived notions about students who do not come from wealthier backgrounds (Gershenson et al., 2015). This fixed mindset makes it more difficult for lower-class students to reach mastery. Hilton and McCleary (2019) stated that teachers with negative views of students living in poverty tend to see these students as less capable, less cultured, and less worthy as learners. These negative views are mostly due to the disconnect between teachers’ and students’ cultural backgrounds (Hilton & McCleary, 2019). People who are involved in education must act against any trends that discriminate against minority students from low-SES backgrounds (Stylianou & Scott, 2018), including the “wealth inequalities perpetuated through capitalist economies and the dominance of superior over inferior cultures” (Stylianou & Scott, 2018, p. 82). Additionally, teacher education programs must start exposing
future teachers to the effects of poverty to counteract the fixed mindsets that teachers have about the complexities of poverty (Hilton & McCleary, 2019). This type of exposure can be in the form of volunteering at local food banks or serving in a homeless shelter, and this exposure must occur on a frequent basis for preservice teachers to get a true experience. It is important that teachers seek to understand by designing a classroom environment that supports and enriches learning for all students. One way to do this is by engaging in culturally relevant conversations with students (Bowman et al., 2018).

**Classroom Environment**

Having a positive classroom environment has a significant impact on the success of a student. Aikens and Barbarin (2008) found that the conditions of a school contribute more to SES differences in learning rates than family characteristics do; thus, the classroom environment plays an important role in student outcomes. Schüller et al. (2016) investigated how students’ beliefs and environmental aspects affected leisure reading. The data were collected using questionnaires and descriptive statistics, internal consistencies, and bivariate correlations of the TPB scales. Schüller et al.’s study results indicated that both personal characteristics and perceived environmental factors explained leisure time reading activities above and beyond background variables such as parental educational attainment. Additionally, the data suggested that a student’s self-efficacy and sense of belonging were increased whenever they had a positive relationship with their teacher. Students must feel like they belong, and a welcoming environment promotes self-efficacy; however, Gershenson and Dee (2017) argued that teachers can unconsciously create environments that make students feel unwelcome. Gershenson and Dee found that environmental factors—such as the demographics of a classroom, the race and sex of
the instructors, and even the design of a classroom—can have a negative impact on student performance even when these factors are not intended to be harmful or offensive to the students.

Students’ classroom environment must adhere to their needs. The SES of a child may not be a determining factor in their reading motivation; children come to school with varying background levels, and the environment that teachers establish may have a significant impact on a child’s reading motivation. Hornstra et al. (2015) aimed to determine the effects that a student’s SES and classroom composition had on the student’s motivation to learn, sense of classroom belonging, and achievement. Students with more privileged backgrounds were not negatively affected by having disadvantaged students in the classroom with them; rather, more privileged students had higher test scores when surrounded by more minority students. The level of self-esteem that the more privileged students have in consideration to the minority students in the classroom must be considered when analyzing Hornstra et al.’s study. The students with more privileged backgrounds more than likely had their basic needs met in comparison to their minority counterparts from disadvantaged backgrounds. Hornstra et al. also found that low-SES students thrive in classrooms if they feel safe to express their concerns and opinions without judgment from others. Thus, if the privileged students were scoring better than their disadvantaged students, it could be concluded that the disadvantaged students did not feel safe to express themselves and felt judged by others in the classroom. The results of Hornstra et al.’s study align with Gershenson and Dee’s (2017) belief that teacher-facing interventions are promising for students. One of these interventions includes teachers building awareness of the students within their classroom by incorporating empathy and perspective-taking strategies (Gershenson & Dee, 2017).
Supportive Teaching

All students do not learn the same way; therefore, instruction must be differentiated. For students to be successful learners, educators must be conscientious of what helps students retain information as well as what hinders student learning (Brown et al., 2014). Kurdi et al. (2018) examined whether student anxiety and academic achievement can moderate the association between instructional teaching practices and student self-perceptions. Kurdi et al. provided strong evidence that supports the idea that students must have a sense of fulfillment whenever they are presented with classroom tasks. Furthermore, Kurdi et al. found a correlation between reading motivation and the number of times students are provided with independent reading time. If students are not a part of literacy-rich environments at home, the teacher must spend time clarifying the purpose for reading as well as the learning goals that follow (Stutz et al., 2016).

The instructional teaching practices that teachers use to reach their students at their point of need will vary based on the students in their classroom. Although the content that is being taught is highly important, relationship building and increasing a student’s emotional growth is also an essential part of child development. Teachers must help students build their confidence level in order to increase a child’s motivational level. Stroet et al. (2015) analyzed 71 empirical studies related to the relationship between supportive teaching and student motivation and engagement. Stroet et al.’s review of articles highlighted the importance of teachers supporting students throughout the learning process. Embedding lessons that focus on this area of development are needed for students to reach mastery. If a child does not feel that they are capable of succeeding, this becomes an additional academic barrier for the child (Claro et al., 2016); thus, teachers must help students foster a successful mindset. Students who already feel
that they come from a home environment that is not encouraging and supportive can particularly benefit from developing a successful mindset (Panadero et al., 2017).

**Teacher Perceptions**

The majority of teachers set goals and objectives for every lesson because they want student learning to occur. As they design lessons, teachers focus their energy on how to implement activities so that their students retain the material. Parkay et al. (2014) believed that teachers must understand their learning style and the learning styles of their students. All students have different character traits, and it is important that teachers meet all students at their point of need. Slavin (2015) stated that “just as students have different personalities, they also have different ways of learning” (p. 93). Often teachers fall victim to teach according to their own learning style; however, teachers have to be mindful to not favor a teaching style because of their own personal experiences. As students expand upon their intellect, teachers must be careful not to categorize their students based on one intelligence. Rather, teachers must dig deep to understand how the multiple intelligences relate to teaching and learning.

Teachers work with students who come from a multitude of different backgrounds. Good instructional practices can be easily identified regardless of students’ racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background (Cole, 2008). It is important to note that the concept of good instructional practices does depend on the type of students being taught. For example, what may seem like a good instructional practice for White, middle-class students may not be good instructional practices for low-SES African American students. It is important that education is not viewed from one lens because inequity in education still persists when working with students from low-SES backgrounds (Isenberg et al., 2016). Students from wealthier backgrounds continue to outperform students from low-income households (Isenberg et al., 2016); however,
there has not been a national push to get to the root cause of the achievement gap. Cole (2008) found that students from low-SES backgrounds are still prejudiced against. When prejudice occurs, it is difficult for these students to reach the same educational attainments as their wealthier counterparts. Teachers who work with disadvantaged students are often apprehensive about letting their students take materials home because they are afraid that their supplies will not be returned (Cole, 2008). Teachers have these beliefs despite the fact that these same students are the ones who would be exceedingly careful to ensure the materials are returned (Cole, 2008).

Teachers have lower expectations for students of color and those from high-poverty backgrounds (Arditi, 2014; Progress 2050, 2017). Teachers’ higher expectations for students can be predicative of future academic success (Arditi, 2014). Students are able to interpret genuine expectations from their teachers, and students from low-SES backgrounds know if teachers have the same expectations for them as they do their more affluent students (Cole, 2008). The response and feedback that teachers give their low-income students can also be misinterpreted. According to Cole (2008), if a teacher is overly sympathetic when a student fails at a task, the student infers that the teacher does not think they are capable of succeeding at the task. Conversely, when a teacher is overzealous with praise, the students may interpret this as their teacher not believing that they could initially complete the task that was asked of them (Cole, 2008). Thus, teachers must have an awareness and understanding of their students. Being culturally responsive to education should no longer be viewed as a best practice for the teacher (Howard, 2018). As the world becomes more diverse, classrooms must do the same. Teachers must go through the necessary steps to ensure they are culturally competent educators; it should no longer be acceptable for teachers to follow or focus on a curriculum that does not relate to the
students within their classrooms. Howard (2018) suggested that an achievement gap in education focuses on students’ deficiencies, whereas an instructional gap focuses on the deficiencies that educators have for not being able to make a connection and advance the students they have who belong to a certain group. Howard’s viewpoint aligns closely with viewpoints of other scholars who work closely with African American students.

**Curriculum Development**

Educators can design curriculum based on the developmental needs of their learners through recognizing the different stages in life that students go through. All learners are unique and have individual characteristics that may require teachers to use a different approach to teaching (Parkay et al., 2014). Developing an appropriate curriculum is complex, and educators must be mindful of the approaches they implement and use. Parkay et al. (2014) identified five significant curriculum goals: citizenship, equal educational opportunity, vocation, self-realization, and critical thinking. Although all of the curriculum goals are applicable, the ones that give low SES a great advantage are curriculums that feature equal educational opportunity, self-realization, and citizenship.

It is imperative that low-SES students receive equal educational opportunities. Educators should prioritize providing students who are part of the generational poverty realm with as much support as possible. Additionally, it is imperative that the education these students receive is from highly qualified teachers because this can significantly impact their success. The American Psychological Association (2017) found that a teachers’ years of experience as well as their quality of training are correlated with children’s academic achievement. Furthermore, children in low-income schools are less likely to have well-qualified teachers. When working with students from low-SES backgrounds, teachers must attend ongoing professional development sessions
that will help them further understand their students. Professional development in this area should be held to a high standard, and the mindset of continually improving upon teaching practice for both teachers and students must be established. Teachers who understand the whole child are more likely to enhance their teaching practices and use a curriculum that ensures the child’s social, emotional, and academic needs are met (Konstantopoulos, 2014).

Parkay et al. (2014) believed that self-realization should include a concept that is important to both the teacher and the student. Having high expectations is a must, and teachers must instill high expectations in themselves as well as in their students. Setting goals and outlining action steps to reach these goals ensures that learning is always occurring. Students who come from low-SES backgrounds do not always see the world from a global perspective; therefore, teachers must help their students set goals and arrange opportunities for them to see people similar to them become successful. Whenever teachers and students both have a high self-esteem and believe in themselves, the culture of the classroom will be positive (Parkay et al., 2014). Students must learn to embrace any difficulties that they have in learning new information and be comfortable making mistakes (Brown et al., 2014). Building students’ confidence levels and encouraging mistakes are necessary for building critical thinkers and problem solvers. Students will be more effective at learning if they capitalize on their strengths and accept that difficulties in learning are overcome by cognitive effort.

The last curriculum goal that helps low-SES students is citizenship. Because society contains such a diverse background of needs, it is vital that both teachers and students respect one another. It is also important that educators pay attention to what is happening in the world to help low-SES students make sense of their surroundings. The goals and values of society play an important role in education. The world is continually changing, and teachers need to be equipped
with the skills necessary to educate students. Teachers must understand what is going on in society as they develop the curriculum. Building and establishing a climate and culture where people care about one another matters. Because so many students observe negative behaviors at home, it is important that citizenship is modeled daily.

**African American Students**

There is an academic achievement gap between African American students and students of other races (Camera, 2015). This gap occurs before students enter kindergarten and continues throughout adulthood. Researchers have found that limited resources affect student achievement and other advancement opportunities that may occur later in life (Camera, 2015). Additionally, predominantly White or wealthier schools attract more qualified educators. Cultural barriers also play a factor in the education of African American students. If teachers do not understand the backgrounds of their students, it makes it more difficult for them to relate content to the child’s experiences (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). According to Bean-Folkes and Ellison (2018), “In today’s social climate, many teachers ponder how to genuinely embrace Black students in their classrooms” (p. 212). Many teachers do think about ways they can embrace their African American students within their classrooms, which indicates that teachers do recognize disparities in education and want to find ways to develop curriculum that relates to their African American students. In contrast, some teachers do not have an interest in being culturally responsive and do not want to update their pedagogy because the acknowledgment of racial differences is an uncomfortable topic (Howard, 2018). However, it is essential to remember that teaching and learning are not about the educators; it is about doing what is best for the child.

Bean-Folkes and Ellison (2018) believed that school systems must create a sense of community where teachers know how to move beyond caring to a culture that creates a
community for students and their families. Lack of cultural understanding is causing more African American students to receive far more school-related discipline referrals than students of other races. African American students may display certain behaviors as a coping mechanism for what they are going through. Because African American students are more likely to experience poverty, family instability, and other conditions that interfere with school attendance and increase behavior problems, enforcing extreme discipline procedures only affects them negatively in the long run (Jacobsen et al., 2019).

**Teacher Effectiveness**

African American students who come from low-SES backgrounds need to have highly qualified teachers hired to teach them (Konstantopoulos, 2014). Teachers who attend regular professional development sessions and seek out additional continuing education classes are more apt to implement effective strategies. Additionally, highly qualified teachers recognize the whole child and strive to go beyond the surface level of the child (Konstantopoulos, 2014). Building upon a students’ individual experiences helps build their intrinsic motivation (Ciampa, 2016). Teachers who are working with disadvantaged African American students must understand their students’ backgrounds and cultures. Bridging this gap will help ensure that these students grow within their classrooms.

Educators can build the relationships with their students by taking the time to understand their students’ background and culture. Bean-Folkes and Ellison (2018) analyzed culturally sustaining practices such as culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching that must be considered when educating African American students. Culturally relevant pedagogy affirms that the cultural experiences are relevant to students, whereas culturally relevant teaching means that teachers are using their students’ cultural knowledge and prior experiences as a
means to make lessons more effective for them (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). School systems must capitalize on cultural pluralism and make learning a reality-based environment to sustain these cultural practices. In other words, educators must bring what is happening outside of the classroom into the walls of their classrooms (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018).

Teachers can have a positive or negative impact on their students (United States Department of Education, 2019). African American communities want teachers who are highly qualified and held accountable, and parents want their children to be prepared for the 21st century and be part of an equity-driven learning environment (Anderson, 2016). Diversifying the teaching profession is the first step to ensuring that African American students are prepared (Progress 2050, 2017). According to Bean-Folkes and Ellison (2018), 84% of teachers are White and only 7% are Black. The lack of diversity among teachers is not a concern because the teachers are White; it is a concern because research shows that African American students benefit from collaborative learning with individuals who relate to their economic, racial, and cultural background (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). Although White teachers may think they understand, research indicates that White teachers misunderstand their Black students’ social, psychological, and cultural differences (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018).

**Reading Development**

Teachers should consider using an innovative developmental reading approach when teaching phonics and phonemic awareness to minority students. An innovative reading approach should focus on engaging students in activities that promote reading skills. Van Rijk et al. (2018) analyzed the effects of developmental education on reading achievement for low-SES minority students. One significant finding from the study was that an innovative developmental education approach is as suitable for students from ethnic minority or low-SES families as the traditional
programmatic instructional approach (Van Rijk et al., 2018). Because low-SES African American students lack reading skills, this approach is easily adaptable to meet the various skills needed in the classroom setting.

Camera (2015) stated that “on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 18% of African American fourth-graders were proficient in reading” (p. 2). As the data were reviewed for older grades, the reading percentage decreased. In 8th grade, only 16% of African American students were proficient in reading (Camera, 2015). Furthermore, the reading proficiency was even lower for African American students who come from a low-SES background. These data revealed a great need for a more in-depth understanding of effective teaching strategies for African American students. Similarly, Biyik et al. (2017) found that a person’s social class does determine the way they value reading. Therefore, it is important to build the love of reading among African American students who come from a lower social class. Teachers’ ability to use diverse and global literature to engage and motivate their African American students is powerful (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). Teachers must empower their students to select relevant and captivating literature that will stimulate students’ thinking and expose them to rich language (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). Moreover, Ciampa (2016) found that giving students the ability to choose increases their motivation and performance.

Social Disparities

The achievement gap in education between low-SES African American students and students of other races begins before kindergarten (Bowman et al., 2018). The theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) addresses this issue by highlighting that many low-SES African American students do not have literacy-rich home environments. Students who are not a part of a literacy-rich environment are already at a major disadvantage. According to Cook (2015), there
is a difference in skill proficiency between Black children as compared to White children. Cook found that White students’ development skills in receptive vocabulary, expressive vocabulary, matching, early counting, color knowledge, number, and shapes were higher than Black students between the ages of 3 and 5 (Cook, 2015).

The National Education Association (2019a) reported that the performance of Black students continues to be systemically different from students of other racial and ethnic groups. The achievement gap continues to widen, even when African American students become adults. According to the National Education Association, only 72% of African American students who were 25 years and older had a high school diploma, and 14% had a bachelor’s degree or higher. Conversely, 85.5% of Whites had a high school diploma, and 27% had a bachelor’s degree or higher (National Education Association, 2019b). This achievement gap continues to widen despite the amount of literature and data available. School systems must target primary-level development to ensure academic success among students entering the grade level below students of other races. Additionally, working towards decreasing the achievement gap means that the amount of academic gains made by African American students will also increase (National Education Association, 2019b). Recognizing the barriers in education may require policies to be created that will ensure meaningful collaboration between community organizations, parents, and school systems. Although many may view African Americans to be apathetic towards education, this is not true (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). Anderson (2018b) discussed the findings of a study conducted by the United Negro College Fund. This study challenges assumptions about apathy and engagement among the African American community on important issues such as education. Anderson found that 66% of low-income African American youth indicated that success in school was the priority most significant to them. Anderson argued that (a) narratives
about educational aspirations of low-income African American youth must be challenged and (b) the widespread student discipline issues in schools through data systems, restorative justice, and cultural competency training must be addressed. African American communities are seeking a reform in education that promotes cultural equality in curriculum and pedagogy; such a reform is the foundation for success in education (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018).

**Culturally Responsive Teaching and Unconscious Bias**

Unintentional bias in education is growing rapidly (Gershenson & Dee, 2017). The automatic responses that teachers have towards their students come from reflexive decision-making, which is known as unconscious bias (Gershenson & Dee, 2017). Increasing teachers’ awareness of their bias in education will help create a culturally responsive teaching environment for African American students (Gershenson & Dee, 2017). Dee (2015) analyzed achievement gaps between minority students and White students. Dee (2015) believed that African American students perform lower than their counterparts due to anxiety that they experience in the school setting. This phenomenon is known as stereotype threat, and it occurs when students feel the need to conform to the stereotypes of their social groups (Dee, 2015). Dee’s study results indicated that minority students’ performance significantly improves when they were given the opportunity to reflect on their core values.

Unconscious bias among teachers is a significant concern because teachers are charged with the responsibility of promoting equity and equality in the classroom (Dee & Gershenson, 2017). People consciously and unconsciously store their experiences; thus, it is difficult to turn off unconscious bias, and teachers must be reflective enough to recognize that unconscious bias is real and can impact their teaching (Dee & Gershenson, 2017). Emdin (2017) recounted his experience working with African American students and quickly determined that stereotypes had
affected his response to his students and his teaching. Emdin immediately judged his students and placed them into categories based on the students he believed would be teachable and those he believed would be problem students. Dee’s (2015) study aligns with Emdin’s response to students who do not perform well due to stereotype threats. For example, Emdin shared an experience where one of his White colleagues needed beakers and pipettes to engage her students in science class. Because they worked in an underfunded school, requesting and then receiving materials did not always occur. However, this teacher did secure the materials for her classroom. When Emdin visited the classroom, the teacher expressed that she was apprehensive about using the materials because she was afraid her students would use them as weapons. This type of unconscious bias creates a divide in engagement and achievement in the classroom (Dee & Gershenson, 2017).

America is becoming increasingly more diverse; thus, classrooms must be designed with a culturally responsive framework. Creating a culturally responsive environment makes learning more effective and relevant (Louisiana State University Shreveport, 2017). Designing effective interventions to help teachers appropriately respond to their students will help with unconscious bias, and students will feel like they are a part of a learning environment that supports their overall well-being (Dee & Gershenson, 2017). Interventions that help decrease unconscious bias and promote culturally responsive environments include building an awareness of one’s own biases without being offended, creating an environment where students are viewed as individuals as opposed to social groups, promoting positive emotions, increasing empathy, and building a partnership that reduces outgroup status (Dee & Gershenson, 2017). Louisiana State University Shreveport (2017) found that a culturally responsive environment reduces discipline problems,
promotes healthy relationships between students and teachers, enhances academic achievement, and increases students’ self-esteem.

**Summary**

Effective teachers recognize their purpose in the classroom and look for additional ways to improve their instructional practices. These teachers take what they already know and find creative and resourceful ways to increase student participation, motivation, and achievement. All students must be part of a dynamic and engaging learning environment so that learning transpires. Motivating low-SES African American students to read requires teachers to understand the culture of the students on a much deeper level. Each child who enters a classroom has different needs that must be met. If these needs are not met, the likelihood of student learning occurring will be minimal. Teachers must take difference approaches to motivating students to read based on the type of students in the classroom. Additionally, teachers who recognize instructional practices and capitalize on student learning increase motivation and achievement among students. Additional research must be conducted to address the achievement gap between low-SES students and students of a higher SES. Because low-SES students are entering schools behind other races, communities must work together to ensure they are providing students with equal opportunities for success. The theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) is an example of how inequalities in education will continue to increase the achievement gap in education.

Teachers can increase students’ reading motivation by allowing students to capitalize on situations that pique their creativity, interests, and curiosity. Different forms of technology such as eBooks of digital game-based learning may be used to help increase student participation and engagement. One factor to continually consider is that low-SES students are at a disadvantage when it comes to learning how to read. Thus, the child’s classroom environment must be
literacy-rich, and instructional plans must also incorporate lessons that focus on building the child's confidence level and self-efficacy. Supportive teaching also helps ensure that instruction is differentiated for low-SES students. Additionally, SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and TPB (Ajzen, 1991) are factors to consider when increasing each students’ level of engagement. Teachers need to find ways to increase student motivation by incorporating these theories into their classrooms.

Although researchers have studied ways to teach low-SES students and African American students, the achievement gap between African American students and students of other races persists. Teachers must recognize the behavior and cultural barriers related to African American students. Every day, teachers work diligently to provide equal learning opportunities for all of their students; however, it is much more difficult to provide these equal learning opportunities to minority students who are from low-SES backgrounds. The achievement gap between low-SES African American students and students of other races may be significantly improved if teachers can understand the importance of implementing best teaching practices that align directly with the students they are teaching.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students in the southern region of West Virginia to read. To do this, I collected and analyzed the data, reported the data, and then compared the findings with the literature. I interviewed teachers about their perceptions of effective instructional practices and motivational strategies. I also identified and interviewed low-SES African American students about their perceptions of strategies that motivate them to learn how to read.

The following chapter outlines the design, research questions, setting, participants, and procedures for the study. Additionally, information such as the researcher’s role, data collection, and data analysis are included. The conclusion of this chapter highlights the trustworthiness of the study, which included credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability. Ethical considerations were discussed, and a summary was provided as a final overview of the chapter.

Design

Narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study research are the five major approaches to qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important for the researcher to examine the research problem to determine which approach to qualitative inquiry works best for the research focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used a case study approach because this research study was contemporary and focused on the how and why of the phenomena explored (Yin, 2018). Case study research seeks to develop an in-depth analysis of a case, which is the goal for this research study (Yin, 2018). Achievement gaps in education between African American students and their counterparts continue to be an issue in education; thus,
understanding the perceptions that teachers have about teaching a specific group of students may help narrow the achievement gap. It is equally as important to understand the perceptions that African American students have about their education. To achieve this goal, multiple sources of evidence were used to collect data, and theoretical propositions guided the design, data collection, and data analysis (Yin, 2018).

This research study focused on exploring Caucasian teachers’ and low-SES African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students to read. Additionally, this study may help others understand why this social phenomenon continues to occur in education. The research study was considered a qualitative study because it sought to make sense of things in a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants in this study had a direct connection to public education. The teachers and students were a part of their learning environments, which are familiar settings to them. Furthermore, the researcher was used as a key instrument in data collection and focused on analyzing the participants’ multiple perspectives and meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Qualitative research is used to empower individuals to share their stories and viewpoints on a particular issue. Researchers continue to highlight that the achievement gap between African American students and other races is significant, and this study allowed me to explore the perceptions of individuals directly related to the issue (Camera, 2015). I used qualitative research to better understand the thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of the participants; qualitative research was appropriate because it is important to recognize why certain behaviors continue to exist in education. In order to get to a deeper understanding of the phenomena, I worked in collaboration with the participants to help convey their voices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I wanted to provide a comprehensive description of instructional practices and
motivational strategies used to motivate low-SES African American students to read; therefore, the case study approach was the most appropriate approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Many fields have used case studies as a means to collect qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social scientists in psychology, medicine, law, and political science helped establish popularity in case study design. Case study research dates back to as early as the 1920s, and today case study researchers have texts and various approaches to choose from (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case studies are distinguished by focusing on the analysis of individuals, groups, programs, or an activity. According to Yin (2018), case study research allows researchers to focus on a case to get a real-world perspective and understand a complex social phenomenon. Although some researchers believe that case study research is easier than other research designs, Yin argued that it is one of the more challenging research methods to execute. Case study research follows a linear but interactive process (Yin, 2018). The components of a case study consist of six entities: (a) planning, (b) designing, (c) preparing, (d) collecting data, (e) analyzing data, and (f) sharing results (Yin, 2018).

During the planning stage of research, the researcher should be able to identify the research problem based on the reviewed literature (Yin, 2018). The planning stage allows the researcher to identify the rationale for the case study, which leads to the development of the research questions (Yin, 2018). I derived the research questions for this study from the SDT and the TPB. The design stage of research focuses on defining the case being studied. Theory and propositions can be used to help guide the case study and simplify the findings. The case study design can be single, multiple, holistic, or embedded (Yin, 2018). Researchers must take certain steps to prepare for data collection. First, the researcher should have the knowledge and skillset to understand the theoretical and methodological issues relevant to the case study (Yin, 2018).
Additionally, the researcher should understand the purpose of the case study, the case study protocol, and how to collect data effectively. During the data collection stage, multiple forms of data can be collected (Yin, 2018). For this study, I collected documentation and conducted interviews and focus groups. Researchers must also consider the strengths and weaknesses of the data collected, which is why various sources of data are important for case study research (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) highlighted all data sources and did not believe that one data source has an advantage over others. Once the data are collected, the researchers analyze the data and then share the results. As data are collected, the researchers must analyze the data to locate patterns, insights, or other identifying concepts (Yin, 2018). Researchers use a five-step process when analyzing data. This process includes compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding the data analyses (Yin, 2018). These concepts should be articulated to the appropriate audience in writing or orally. Yin believed that the interpretation and conclusion part of the case study process brings the results and findings to closure.

Every type of research study has an implicit design (Yin, 2018). I obtained a comprehensive description of instructional practices and motivational strategies that were used to motivate low-SES African American students to read (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case studies are distinguished by focusing on the analysis of individuals, groups, programs, or an activity. The three variations of a case study are instrumental, multiple, and intrinsic case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In a single instrumental case study, the researcher focuses on an issue and selects one case to illustrate the issue. In contrast, researchers conducting a selective case study select multiple case studies to illustrate the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The intrinsic case study focuses on the case itself (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used an instrumental case study approach for this research study because I focused on research questions that aimed to understand a
particular case. I explored teachers’ and students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students to read. The insight from the teachers and students helped provide insight on the issue, which allowed generalizations about the issues to be established.

Research Questions

The research questions for this case study were as follows:

1. What instructional strategies and methods are teachers using to build the motivational levels of their students?
2. What methods are teachers using to link their students’ beliefs with the desired behavioral outcomes?
3. What factors contribute to low-SES African American students’ success in reading?
4. How could teachers cultivate a reading environment where they are culturally responsive and can support low-SES African American students?
5. What are Caucasian teachers and African American students’ perceptions of effective instructional and motivational strategies?

Setting

The research study took place at two schools in the Mancover County School District. To protect the identity of individuals used in this research study, Mancover is a pseudonym. Mancover is a rural school district in southern West Virginia that serves a little over 9,200 students. There are 26 schools within this district, and approximately 641 teachers are employed with this school district (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). The three schools that were selected for the research study are Belmont Intermediate School, Lakewood Elementary, and Reedville Middle School, which are also pseudonyms.
Belmont Intermediate School

Belmont Intermediate School is located in the southern region of the county. Approximately 338 students attend this school. Belmont is a Title I School, which means that the school receives additional federal funding to support students and families. The school is also considered a Community Eligible School (CEP); therefore, 100% of the students receive free breakfast and lunch. In order to qualify to be a CEP School, the majority of the student population has to be economically disadvantaged. Approximately 54% of the students are male, and 46% are female. The demographics of the students at the school are as follows: 60% White, 30% African American, 8% Multiracial, and the remaining 2% consist of other races such as Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic (West Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

This school serves students who are in third through fifth grades, and all teachers are considered highly qualified. The school employs certified classroom teachers, Title I reading teachers, instructional interventionists, and special education teachers. I chose this school because it serves a diverse population, and it is also within the same region as Lakewood Elementary and Reedville Middle School. The level of teaching experience ranges from novice to advanced. All of the teachers work collaboratively under the leadership of an experienced principal. The principal has served the school for 3 years; however, this is her fifth year as a principal in the county. Before she became the principal at Belmont, she was a teacher in Mancover County. She is familiar with the students and their social and emotional needs.

Lakewood Elementary

Lakewood Elementary is located in the southern region of the county. Approximately 187 students attend this school. Lakewood is a Title I School and a CEP school. Approximately 45%
of the students are male and 55% are female. The demographics of the students at the school are as follows: 82% White, .06% African American, 10% Multiracial, and the remaining 7.94% consist of other races such as Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic (West Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

Lakewood Elementary serves students in kindergarten through fifth grade, and all teachers are considered highly qualified. The school employs certified classroom teachers, Title I reading teachers, and instructional interventionists. I chose this school because it is also within the same region as Belmont and Reedville. This elementary school also feeds into Reedville Middle School. Although the school does not have a high percentage of African American students, the teachers have taught low-SES African American students. The level of teaching experience ranges from novice to advanced. All of the teachers work collaboratively under the leadership of their principal. The principal has worked in Mancover County for several years.

Reedville Middle School

Reedville Middle School is located in the southern region of the county. Approximately 493 students attend this school. Reedville is a Title I School and a CEP school. Approximately 54% of the students are male and 46% are female. The demographics of the students at the school are as follows: 72% White, 19% African American, .07% Multiracial, and the remaining 8.93% consist of other races such as Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic (West Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

Reedville Elementary serves students in sixth through eighth grade, and all teachers are considered highly qualified. The school employs certified classroom teachers, Title I reading teachers, and instructional interventionists. I chose this school because it is also within the same region as Belmont and Lakewood. The students who attend Belmont and Lakewood feed into
Reedville Middle School. The level of teaching experience ranges from novice to advanced. All of the teachers work collaboratively under the leadership of their experienced principal. The current principal has worked in Mancover County for several years.

Participants

The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students in the southern region of West Virginia to read. The African American students who participated in this study ranged from second through sixth grade. I used a purposeful, homogenous sample technique to select the participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) believed that this type of sampling best informs the researcher about the research problem being studied. Furthermore, homogenous sampling “focuses, reduces, simplifies, and facilitates group interviewing” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 159). I selected participants based on certain criteria to ensure that the research questions were adequately addressed. The Caucasian teachers were selected based on the following criteria: (a) must be a classroom teacher at an elementary school, (b) must work in the district that is being used for the research study, (c) must teach a component of reading, and (d) must work with low-SES African American students. The African American students were selected based upon the following criteria: (a) must be elementary or middle school, (b) must attend school in the district that is being used for the research study, (c) must receive at least 90 minutes of reading instruction per day, (d) must be considered a low-SES African American student, (e) must read on a level equivalent to second grade or higher, and (f) must not have an individualized education plan.

Approximately 25 teachers and 200 students were eligible to participate in the study. I sent an e-mail invitation to the teachers (see Appendix A) asking if they would like to participate
in the study after the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and superintendent approved the study (see Appendix B and C). The principal at each school received a copy of the invitation to share with their faculty. Each student who was eligible to participate in the study was sent home letter addressed to their parents that explained the parameters of the research project (see Appendix D) as well as a consent form seeking parents’ approval for their child to participate (see Appendix E). Researchers conducting qualitative case studies that use a homogeneous approach must ensure that they can build a relationship with the participants so that the participants adequately report data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, eight teachers were selected as participants for the interview and focus group. Seven teachers agreed to continue after the interviews took place. Eight students agreed to participate in the student interviews; however, once the interviews took place, only five students agreed to continue with the research study. It was imperative to ensure diversity among the teachers and students selected.

Students and teachers signed a consent form after agreeing to participate in the research study (see Appendix E and F). Teachers were adults, and were thus allowed to sign their own consent. However, the students who were selected for this study were required to have their consent form signed by a parent or guardian. After the consent forms were returned, the interview process began. Following the collection of documentation, I conducted face-to-face interviews via video conference to help provide additional insight into the issues being researched. Following the interviews, I conducted a focus group with the teachers. I asked the focus group participants additional questions that aimed to explore Caucasian teachers’ perceptions of motivational reading strategies and student–teacher relationships. I asked the students who participated in the research project to participate in individual interviews. I had also scheduled a second focus group for the student participants; however, the parents and guardians
of the student participants did not want other children to know that their child was labeled as a low-SES student. Therefore, the focus group for students was cancelled.

**Teacher Participants**

Twenty-five teachers were eligible to participate in the research study. I sent each of the participants an e-mail invitation inviting them to be a participant (see Appendix A). The e-mail was sent out 2 months before the research study took place. The principals at Belmont Intermediate, Lakewood Elementary, and Reedville Middle School also received a copy of the invitation to share with the eligible faculty members at their school. The principals were asked to share the flyer with all teachers. One week after the e-mail and flyer was distributed, I scheduled a meeting with the principals at the schools to discuss distributing the documentation that was requested for the research study. I provided each principal with an outline of the steps I planned to follow when requesting the documentation. I asked all 25 teachers to submit the requested documentation; however, only eight teachers were selected to participate in the interviews and focus group. The teachers were notified if they were selected as a participant for the study. Once the participants were selected, I made a contact with the participants to determine teachers’ availability. The interviews lasted no longer than 1 hour. I recorded the interviews so that I could refer back to responses and accurately transcribe the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews occurred after the regular school hours via Microsoft Teams. I asked open-ended questions to give teachers the ability to explain and expound upon their roles in regard to the research questions.

**Student Participants**

Two-hundred students were eligible to participate in the research study. A letter was sent home to the students’ parents explaining the research study (see Appendix D) as well as a
consent form that parents were required to sign and return if they agreed to let their child participate in the study (see Appendix E). All 200 students were eligible to participate in the study; however, only eight students were randomly selected to participate in the study. The students who returned their permission forms were all assigned a number. I used a random number generator to select the eight participants. The interviews for the students occurred after the regular school day via Microsoft Teams and took no longer than 30 minutes to complete. I asked open-ended questions to give the students the ability to discuss and share their thoughts openly.

All of the information that was gathered was kept private. The interviews were recorded so that data could accurately be transcribed, and I used two separate devices to record the interview sessions in case one of the devices malfunctioned. The data collected was secured on a password-protected personal computer. The document where the data were stored also required a password to access. All information collected remained confidential, and I was the only person who could access this information.

**Procedures**

The data collection for this research study occurred after all university and school procedures were followed and after I secured approval from the IRB (see Appendix B). I also obtained approval from the superintendent for Mancover County Schools before proceeding with data collection (see Appendix C). Before I proceeded with the interviews and focus group meetings, I consulted with experts in the field to ensure the questions were clear to the participants. To help secure the participants for the study, I gave a $10 Starbucks gift card to the teachers who chose to be a part of the interview and focus group process. All students who participated received a new book, a box of crayons, and vocabulary and/or sight word reading
cards. The vocabulary/sight word reading cards were given to the students depending on the students’ ages. Students received these items as a token of appreciation for participating.

**The Researcher's Role**

Throughout this study, I realized that I was a human instrument for data collection. I was the person solely responsible for collecting data from the documentation, interviews, and focus group. I analyzed the documentation and took notes during the face-to-face interviews. I was responsible for ensuring that all information gathered from the teacher and student interviews and focus group were transcribed accurately. As the human instrument, it was imperative that I gathered and reported the data in a trustworthy manner. It is important that researchers set aside their own experiences to accurately understand the issue being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018); therefore, it was important that all data were collected from an objective viewpoint.

I have worked in the Mancover County school district for 6 years. Although I have worked in the same area as the participants, the participants have never worked in the same school as me. I also ensured that the student participants were not former students of mine. I have interacted with a few of the participants at countywide professional development sessions and training; however, no other personal relationships with the participants have occurred. Many of the participants know me as a principal at a school in the area. It is my hope that the data collected from this research helped provide an explanation on how educators can better support low-SES African American students.

As a principal in the district, I work directly with a team of people who are always looking for additional ways to improve countywide instructional practices. Two years ago, Belmont Intermediate School received a D-School rating because their state assessment scores were deemed unsatisfactory by the state. The two primary schools that feed into this intermediate
school also received the same rating by default. The only data used to determine school ratings are state assessment scores. Only students in third through twelfth grade are eligible to participate in the state assessments. The primary school where I work only serves kindergarten through second grade. After an analysis of the data, our team noticed that the African American students had the best school attendance; however, they had the lowest test scores. This analysis led me to reflect on what the district is doing to address this issue. The students are attending school; however, the data do not reflect achievement. I realized that my connection to this issue could cause bias; thus, I used bracketing to help me separate my personal connections to the study (Yin, 2018).

**Data Collection**

Researchers must use a variety of data collection methods to ensure trustworthiness in analyzing and interpreting the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation is a major strength of case study research because the researcher has the opportunity to collect and use many different sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). The methods that I used for this case study included collecting documentation, interviews, and a focus group. I used the documentation as an additional piece of evidence to determine teachers’ perception of motivational strategies used to motivate their low-SES students how to read. The documentation also helped stimulate the teachers’ thoughts by getting them to reflect on the documentation that was submitted. I reviewed the documentation to determine if additional questions needed to be added to the individual interviews and focus group session. Each of the participants who were selected for the individual interviews and focus groups were e-mailed and called to determine the best date and time for the interviews to occur.
Teacher Documentation

The first data collection method used was the gathering of documentation. According to Yin (2018), documentation can be very useful in case study research; however, there are strengths and weaknesses in using this type of evidence for case study research. The strength of using documentation is that it can be reviewed repeatedly, and it is not created as a result of the case study (Yin, 2018). Documentation is also broad, which allows the researcher to review documentation from different points in time. The weaknesses of using documentation include retrievability, broad selectivity, reporting bias, and accessibility (Yin, 2018). The documentation that was collected for this case study included the following: lesson plans, anecdotal notes, and weekly newsletters that teachers use to communicate reading goals and initiatives.

The documentation collected helped validate the information that was received from other sources (Yin, 2018). It was important for the teachers to have adequate time to collect the data requested, and the teachers knew in advance that the documentation was another piece of evidence in understanding their perceptions about motivating low-SES students to read. It was my hope that the documentation pieces provided an additional way of obtaining information from people who have a direct relationship to the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interviews

The second data collection method was the interviews. Yin (2018) stated that interviews are an important source of case study evidence. Interviews provide researchers with answers to the how and why questions of events or issues that occur (Yin, 2018). It was essential that the participants interviewed were comfortable and had a positive rapport with me. Because the participants were comfortable, they were more willing to share their stories and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
Many steps go into executing the interview process. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that interview questions should be open-ended and focus on the phenomenon that is being studied. For this study, the phenomenon was motivating low-SES African American students to read. The face-to-face interviews occurred once the interviewees were selected. I recorded all interviews to ensure that the data were accurately transcribed. Audio recordings are more accurate than handwritten notes (Yin, 2018); therefore, I obtained permission from each interviewee to record the interview. Each individual face-to-face interview took place via video conference in a familiar and quiet setting where the interviewee was comfortable.

**Teacher Interview Questions.** Teachers were asked the following questions during one-on-one interviews (see Appendix G):

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How long have you been a teacher?
3. What is your favorite part about teaching?
4. What challenges do you face when teaching reading?
5. What is your experience teaching low-SES students to read?
6. What is your experience teaching African American students to read?
7. What is your experience teaching low-SES African American students to read?
8. What motivational strategies do you use in your classroom to motivate students to read?
9. What is your experience teaching motivational reading strategies to your students?
10. How do you determine which instructional reading strategies are effective for your students?
11. How do you perceive the achievement gap for African American students in comparison to other races?

12. What does the term culturally responsive mean to you?

13. What is your experience in cultivating an environment that is culturally responsive to low-SES African American students?

14. How do you know if a teacher is a culturally responsive teacher?

Researchers can ask six different types of research questions (Patton, 2014). Each of these questions comes from the literature related to the research topic. I asked interview questions that helped address how to motivate low-SES African American students to read. The first three questions helped to build background knowledge about the participants. Additionally, the first three questions were used to help the interviewee become more comfortable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions 4–10 were knowledge and experience questions. It was important to understand the setbacks and difficulties that already occurred in the classroom. Anderson (2016) and Camera (as cited in Bowman et al., 2018) discussed how imperative it is for teachers to be culturally responsive to the student. Bowman et al. (2018) believed that addressing the achievement gap starts with understanding the perceptions that others have about African American students. The information from Questions 4–10 helped form the focus group questions. Question 11 was also a knowledge question; however, this question focused on achievement gaps in education. Questions 12–14 focused on teachers’ perceptions about being culturally responsive. Kurdi et al. (2018) believed that teachers must understand what a culturally responsive classroom looks like to effectively differentiate their instruction.

**Student Interview Questions.** Students were asked the following questions during one-on-one interviews (see Appendix H):
1. Tell me about yourself.

2. What is your favorite part of school?

3. What are your experiences like with your teachers?

4. What does your teacher do that you like?

5. What is your favorite subject?

6. What are some reasons as to why you enjoy reading?

7. Describe the types of books that your teacher reads aloud in your classroom?

8. What does your teacher do to motivate you to read?

9. Why kinds of characters are in the books that your teacher reads aloud?

10. How do you determine if you are as smart as your classmates?

11. What types of stories do you share with your teacher or classmates about your life?

12. How do you know if your teacher values you?

The student interview questions were grounded in the literature. It was important that all students were able to openly share their responses to the questions. When working with students from low-SES backgrounds, it is important to give them the opportunity to share without feeling like they are being judged (Beegle, 2017). Patton (2014) believed that questions that focus on what a person does or experiences will help the researchers further understand the phenomenon being studied. Questions 1 and 2 were background questions. These questions were used to help ensure that the student felt comfortable sharing their opinions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions 3 and 4 were important because low-SES students see the world in a much smaller spectrum and they make decisions based upon their survival needs as well as the relationships that they have with others (Jensen, 2009). Some students do not have a positive relationship with
their teacher, which could be one of the reasons they are not motivated to read. Questions 5–7 were knowledge questions and were meant to assess how the student perceives learning and their connection to the learning environment. Questions 8–10 were questions that addressed how teachers can provide appropriate support to students to motivate the students to read. Questions 11 and 12 were questions used to determine if the student feels supported and has self-confidence.

**Focus Groups**

The third collection method for the case study was the focus group for the teachers. I conducted one focus group comprised of just teachers. A focus group allows participants to have an informal discussion about their experiences and viewpoints about the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I established the focus group after the documentation was requested and individual interviews were completed. The focus group consisted of seven teachers. I developed focus group prompts based on the data collected from the interviews and collected documentation. The focus group was used as an opportunity for the participants to share additional information, and for the researchers to get additional clarification about anything that was still unclear.

**Focus Group Questions.** Yin (2018) believed that focus groups allow the moderator to surface views from each person in the group. The following prompts were used to stimulate the conversation (see Appendix I):

1. Discuss the importance of building student–teacher relationships.
2. What types of achievement gaps do you see in education?
3. What types of achievement gaps do you see between races in education?
4. What types of motivational strategies are most effective in teaching low-SES African American students?
5. What do you do to promote reading in your classroom?

6. How do you know if your students are motivated to read in your classroom?

The focus group questions for the teachers were grounded in the literature. It was important for the teachers to feel comfortable sharing their responses openly. The first question was used to develop knowledge about the teachers and their viewpoints in regard to student–teacher relationships. Jenson (2009) discussed how imperative it is for teachers and students to have positive relationships in the classroom. Questions 2 and 3 were knowledge questions. Achievement data has revealed a gap between White students and students from minority groups (Camera, 2015). This gap is continuing to widen; thus, it is important to assess teachers’ knowledge about achievement gaps in education (Webb & Thomas, 2015). Questions 4–6 were all related to reading development. Ciampa (2016) discussed the importance of implementing effective reading strategies in the classroom. These questions helped me further understand what teachers are currently doing in the classroom and how these efforts and activities correlate with what researchers consider effective reading practices.

I designed the focus group questions to get an understanding of motivational factors that influence low-SES students to read. The achievement gap in reading for African American students continues to be a global educational concern. As a result, the methods being used in the classroom must be explored (Camera, 2015). Bowman et al. (2018) found that early childhood education is an important predictor of school outcomes. The questions listed provided data to help determine teachers’ perceptions of reading motivation. It is important that teachers understand what motivates their students to read (Biyik et al., 2017). Although teachers may believe they are providing students with a solid foundation for reading motivation, teachers must also consider the role that their students have in the classroom. Implementing effective strategies
that engage students in the reading process as well as motivate them to read is essential to reading development (Ciampa, 2016). Providing students with a variety of options increases the likelihood of student success (Ciampa, 2016).

**Data Analysis**

The process of analyzing qualitative data in a study requires the researcher to fully understand the data being collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data analysis is one of the last steps in case study research (Yin, 2018). It is important that researchers immerse themselves in the data on several different occasions; doing so helps ensure that the researcher is familiar with the data before they start breaking the data into parts and looking for correlations (Yin, 2018). In this research project, I used various data analysis techniques to help understand the data that were collected. I created data tables and a matrix of categories to help organize the data into categories. I also used flow charts and graphics to help with organizing the data. According to Yin (2018), searching for patterns and insights early will help as the manipulation of data occurs.

The data analysis for this research consisted of using a 5-step process. This process includes compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding the data analyses (Yin, 2018). I compiled the data from the documentation, interviews, and a focus group. First, I reviewed the documentation and looked for reoccurring trends from the different pieces of evidence. Next, I transcribed the data from the interviews and focus group. I used the Microsoft Teams transcription as well as Rev to help transcribe the data. The transcription helped me search for specific codes in the data. The data were then disassembled and coding occurred. Coding helped divide the information into parts that allowed for themes to be easily identified (Yin, 2018). Once the codes were grouped into themes, the data were reassembled so that broad patterns could be determined. I used the computer software package NVivo to complete data
analysis and analyzed the similarities between the documentation pieces, interviews, and focus group responses. I looked for specific words and phrases that were used by the participants. By doing this, new codes did arise as the patterns were reviewed (Yin, 2018).

The next step of data analysis was the interpretation of the results. Interpreting the results is the part of the research study where a description and explanation of the phenomena is discussed (Yin, 2018). A description of instructional practices used to motivate low-SES African American students to read was discussed. An attentive approach to data analysis also occurred. I used as much evidence as possible to help provide answers to the research questions. All of the data were used accurately and I made conclusions from the data.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness addresses credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. It is important that the researcher fully understands how trustworthiness affects studies. Creswell and Poth (2018) believed that trustworthiness is also a validation of the study and helps build the credibility of the researcher’s work.

**Credibility**

Credibility helps establish the trustworthiness of the study because it helps the researcher link the findings to reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One way that I ensured credibility was through triangulation. I used multiple types of data as a means to collect evidence. Specifically, I used documentation, interviews, and a focus group and the data were analyzed according to how the data were collected and interpreted. Furthermore, triangulation helped validate the evidence if there were contradictions in research. I also used member checking to help establish credibility. This method for establishing credibility encouraged the participants to provide feedback on the preliminary and written analyses to ensure that the data were being reported
accurately (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the research and interview questions were
grounded in literature and focused on answering the research questions.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability are essential components for a qualitative study (Yin, 2018). In dependable studies, all processes and procedures can be effectively repeated and the same outcomes occur (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected and analyzed, and a description of the data was reported accurately. The procedures section thoroughly outlined the process of implementing the research study. Additionally, experts in the field piloted the interview and focus group questions to ensure the questions asked were clear.

Confirmability is the researcher’s ability to remain neutral and free from bias (Yin, 2018). Researchers should ensure that the participants’ thoughts are an accurate depiction of the information and not the researchers’ preference (Yin, 2018). Understanding my role as a human instrument and bracketing my viewpoints helped add to the trustworthiness of the research study (Yin, 2018).

**Transferability**

Transferability is the ability of the research study findings to be applicable to other situations and populations (Yin, 2018). To achieve this goal, I developed a thorough description of the case study to help other experts in the field compare the data to other studies. Additionally, the data included as many details as possible to ensure transferability (Yin, 2018). Transferability was achieved with this research study because I ensured that the data were recorded and reported accurately.
Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations should occur throughout each stage of the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I obtained the proper approval before collecting data. The IRB approval, superintendent approval, and consent forms were all received and checked for accuracy before beginning the research study. All participants had a clear understanding of the research study, and I answered all of participants’ questions before the research study began. The purpose of the study was shared with all participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the identities of the schools used as well as the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and all data were safely secured on password-protected devices. At the conclusion of the study, all of the participants were included in closing conversations and a discussion of the findings.

Summary

The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students in the southern region of West Virginia to read. This chapter provided a thorough overview of the methods that were used to conduct this research study. Qualitative research is used to gain an understanding of a social phenomenon. I used the collected documentation, interviews, and focus group questions to understand the participants’ perceptions about motivational factors for low-SES African American students. I analyzed the data by compiling, assembling, disassembling, interpreting, and then forming conclusions about the data. I established trustworthiness of the research study by ensuring creditability, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. This chapter also included procedures for conducting the study, the researcher’s role, and how ethical considerations were achieved.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This case study explored Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students in the southern region of West Virginia to read. The purpose of this chapter is to present the study findings. The chapter begins with a description of the participants, provides a breakdown of the data results, and concludes with a summary. The data analysis process involved compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding the data analyses (Yin, 2018).

The analyzed data came from the collected documentation, interviews, and focus group. The documentation collected included lesson plans, anecdotal notes, and weekly newsletters that teachers used to communicate reading goals and initiatives. The teacher and student interviews were conducted one-on-one via video conference and were professionally transcribed using the Microsoft Teams software as well as Rev. I also conducted a focus group with the teacher participants. I carefully reviewed the documentation and read the transcripts several times. To maintain the participants confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participates and the schools. The knowledge gained from this case study may assist others in finding effective ways to motivate low-SES African American students to read.

Participants

Seven Caucasian teachers and five low-SES African American students participated in this study. All of the teachers are employed with Mancover County Schools, and the student participants attended either Belmont Intermediate School or Reedville Middle School. I selected the participants using a purposeful, homogenous sample, and the administrators were asked for recommendations of participants they thought would be interested in the research study. Table 1
gives an overview of the participants, including participants’ pseudonyms, role in the research, number of years taught by each teacher, and grade level for students. To keep the teacher participants from being identified, the number of years taught was categorized as novice (1–3 years taught), intermediate (4–5 years taught), and advanced (6+ years taught).

**Table 1**

*Participant Information*

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<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Teacher experience (teachers)/grade level (student)</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>6th Grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Peyton**

Peyton is an intermediate-level teacher who has taught mostly upper-elementary students. When he found out he was selected as a participant, he sent me an e-mail expressing his excitement. His favorite part of teaching is being able to share the learning process with his students. He loves to implement research-based projects and unit-based studies in his classroom. Peyton believes that journal writing and giving students time to discuss and share their opinion is
a great way to motivate them to read. He also believes that reteaching and giving students the ability to make choices helps with student engagement.

Aspen

Aspen is an intermediate-level teacher who has experience teaching special education as well as upper-elementary students. Aspen was very open about her teaching experiences. She discussed her experiences growing up in rural West Virginia and how she had to shift her mindset when she started teaching at the school where she currently works. Aspen stated that she believes that the achievement gap between African American students and Caucasian students stems from the lack of teachers who are willing to accept change and embrace African American students’ culture. Aspen’s interview took the longest, and she spent a great deal of time discussing the curriculum that she teaches. She made several references about textbooks being seclusive, and she believed these companies need to produce more diverse content.

Sarah

Sarah is an advanced teacher who repeatedly stated how much she loved her job and her students. She was very enthusiastic throughout the interview and stated that she loves getting to read aloud to her students. When asked about her perception of achievement gaps in education, she felt there was more of an achievement gap between social classes than between races. She said that she does believe there is an achievement gap between races; however, the achievement gap between social classes is much more significant.

Kayla

Kayla is an intermediate-level teacher who has taught special education as well as upper and lower elementary. She believed that many teachers have a solid focus on teaching; however, she has noticed that the focus on children’s social and emotional development is fairly recent.
She said that her favorite part of teaching is being with little kids. She believes that teachers are “superheroes who have the ability to change lives.” When asked what the term culturally responsive meant to her, Kayla said that she felt it meant that “we must celebrate all cultures and find time throughout the day to educate our students about people who do not think or look like them.”

**Blaire**

Blaire is an advanced teacher who stated her favorite part of teaching is helping her students grow. She was very enthusiastic and bubbly throughout the interview. She believed that building relationships and using extrinsic motivators are great ways to motivate her low-SES students to read. She stated that she does not see a difference between her African American students and her Caucasian students. She said that she treats them all the same and does not see color. When I asked Blaire her perceptions on the achievement gap between African American students and other races, she stated, “I know there is research that says African American students are farther behind than White students, but I see more of a gap between social classes.” Throughout the interview, Blaire repeatedly mentioned how much she loved her students and school.

**Susan**

Susan is an advanced teacher who has taught a variety of grades from kindergarten to middle school. She said that she loves teaching and could not imagine doing anything else with her life. Susan shared that her favorite part of teaching is the ability to learn along with her students. Susan stated that her experience teaching African American students is different from her experiences teaching Caucasian students. When I asked Susan about the challenges she faces when teaching reading, she said she has to use a point and prize system a lot. She said that she
rarely teaches students who have developed a love for reading. She mentioned that when she taught primary students, they were often on such varying levels that it was difficult to find time to build reading stamina.

Amanda

Amanda is an advanced teacher who has taught for many years. She was very funny and honest throughout the interview. When I asked her how long she has taught, she said, “Let’s just say that I could have retired a long time ago.” I asked Amanda what she loved about teaching, and she said that she loved working with children and that it keeps her young. She stated, “One of the reasons I have not retired yet is because when I start to get tired of what I am doing, I change it up by switching grade levels.” I asked Amanda about her perceptions of teaching reading to low-SES African American students, and she paused for quite some time before she answered. Amanda said that when she first started teaching, things were very different. She commented, “I grew up thinking a certain way. You know … I guess I didn’t know any better. I am a better teacher now than I was back in the day.” When I asked Amanda what it meant to be culturally responsive, she replied that “we are not a culturally responsive nation, so we surely aren’t going to be culturally responsive teachers.”

Sharon

Sharon is a third-grade student who loved to draw and hang out with her friends. She was very shy at the beginning of the interview; however, towards the end, she started to talk more. Her favorite subject is science, and her favorite part of school is recess because she gets to spend time with her friends. I asked Sharon what her experiences were like with her teachers, and she was very positive. I asked Sharon if she liked to read, and she said sometimes. When she does read, she likes to read books about animals. She said her teacher has some books about animals,
but they mostly read the stories in her reading book. When I asked Sharon how she determines if she is as smart as her classmates, she said she did not know. She said that she gets good grades on her tests.

**Zamaria**

Zamaria is a fourth-grade student, and she was very talkative during the interview. She spent a lot of time talking about her friends and what they do while they are at school. She said her favorite part of school is math because they get to build things. She stated, “My teacher has these fun math kits, and we can play games with our friends, but we can’t play them all the time because she has to clean them.” I asked Zamaria if she liked to read, and she said that she does and enjoyed funny books. I asked her if her teacher reads aloud to her class, and she said that she reads in the morning during breakfast and sometimes after lunch. When I asked Zamaria if she ever shares stories about her life with her teachers or classmates and she said, “Not really because we aren’t allowed to talk a lot in class.”

**Randolph**

Randolph is a fourth-grade student who loves to play sports. He plays soccer, football, and basketball. He talked about his experience getting to play football at The Greenbrier Resort, and he mentioned that his parents got to go with him. When I asked Randolph what his teacher does that he liked, he shrugged his shoulders and said he did not know. I asked him his favorite subject, and he said he enjoyed math. I asked Randolph if he liked to read, and he said he hated to read and that it was boring. He mentioned that his teacher would sometimes give him a prize if he did a good job on his test. I asked him how many prizes he has received, and he smiled and said he only gets them sometimes because the tests are hard. He mentioned that the tests have a lot of big words and that they are long.
**Aerial**

Aerial is a fifth-grade student who loves gymnastics and dance. When I asked her how long she had been taking gymnastics and dance and she stated, “I just do it in my backyard or in the basement with my aunt. She used to be a cheerleader, so she helps me sometimes.” Aerial said her favorite subject was reading and that she has a lot of Accelerated Reader points. I asked her to explain what Accelerated Reader was, and she said, “it is on my iPad, and when you read a book, it will ask you questions, and you get points if you do good.” She was very enthusiastic when she talked about the program. I asked Aerial if her teacher ever reads aloud to the class, and she stated that her teacher would help them read stories in their reading book. I asked Aerial how she knows that her teacher values her. I could tell by her expression that the question confused her, so I rephrased it and asked her how she knows her teacher cares about her. She responded, “My teacher smiles at me and tells me I am a good student. One time I got student of the month, and she told me she was happy for me.” She perked up when she shared this with me.

**Jacob**

Jacob is a sixth-grade male student who was not very interested in the interview. Based on the conversation that I had with Jacob’s mom, I felt that this was something she felt was important for him to do. I asked Jacob what he liked to do, and he said he liked playing basketball and riding bikes with his friends. Jacob said that he did not have a favorite subject and said that school was hard for him. I asked him if school was always hard, and he said that he did a good job last year. Jacob and I talked about reading, and he said he does not read a lot. He only reads when he has to, and the books he has to read are boring. Jacob said that he has different teachers and that sometimes they are mean. When I asked if he thinks his teachers like him, he
said that he gets in trouble. Jacob’s responses throughout the interview were very short, and I could tell that talking about school was an uncomfortable topic for him.

**Results**

The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students in the southern region of West Virginia to read. For this study, I used a qualitative method to better understand the phenomenon (achievement gap in education). This method allowed me to study the participants and understand the phenomena through the teachers’ and students’ perspectives. The research questions were developed with an emphasis on the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980), the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), the achievement gap in reading between African Americans and students of other races, as well as teachers’ and students’ perceptions of instructional and motivational practices that influence reading development. The data sources included documentation, interviews, and a focus group. The documentation collected helped validate the information that was received from the other sources (Yin, 2018). Several themes emerged from the data collection and the results of the case study; these themes are highlighted in the theme development section. Codes were developed which led to the development of themes.

**Documentation Analysis**

The documentation collected for this study included lesson plans, anecdotal notes, and weekly newsletters. The lesson plans at the elementary level were more in-depth than the lesson plans at the middle school level. The elementary lesson plans were detail oriented and focused on reading development such as writing, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. The lesson plans were predictable and followed a consistent pattern. The teachers kept the same format each week, and many of the lesson plans included the lesson objective as well as the state standards. The middle
school lesson plans had the essential question and daily skills. One of the middle school teachers also included the theme for the lesson. The middle school lesson plans were concise and focused on the specific subject area being taught, whereas the elementary lesson plans embedded other content areas (science and social studies) in the reading content area.

In reviewing the documentation, I only had a few teachers who submitted anecdotal notes. Therefore, during the interviews, I asked some of the teachers how they kept track of their students’ progress and development. Many of these teachers replied that they mostly keep documentation of the students who are struggling academically and behaviorally. Sarah mentioned that if a student is having difficulty, she refers them to the school’s Student Assistant Team and that important documentation and data are periodically added to the student’s file. During Kayla’s interview, she mentioned that keeping track of student progress can be overwhelming, so she felt it was important for teachers to be intentional with their record keeping. She also said that assessment programs store a lot of data for teachers, so you do not have to take nearly as many handwritten notes.

The elementary teachers were the only ones who sent home weekly newsletters. The weekly newsletters included the skills that were being focused on for the week (spelling, grammar, math skills, and vocabulary words) and important reminders about upcoming activities and events. Kayla stated that she believes it is important to send home weekly newsletters because “it allows parents to have a snapshot of their child’s week.” The middle school teachers did not submit any weekly newsletters.

**Theme Development**

The analysis of the documentation, interviews, and focus group led to many themes. I reviewed the data several times to ensure that I was familiar with the data and could make
appropriate correlations (Yin, 2018). I conducted a total of 12 interviews and one focus group. Due to COVID-19, all of the interviews were conducted via video conference using the Microsoft Teams software. This software was easily accessible to the researcher and participants. All of the interviews and the focus group were recorded to ensure the data were accurately transcribed (Yin, 2018). The interview process began by interviewing seven teachers; these interviews lasted 18 to 30 minutes each.

Each of the participants was asked 14 questions. Each question was inspired by the literature and related to the research topic. Following the teacher interviews, all of the teacher participants participated in the focus group. I asked a total of six focus group questions, and all questions were grounded in literature. The focus group took approximately 45 minutes. During the last 10 minutes of the focus group, a couple of the teachers did have questions about the research study. The second part of the interview process involved interviewing the student participants. Five students agreed to be a part of the research study. The student participants were asked 12 questions, and interviews lasted 20 to 35 minutes each. Due to the nature of the research study, the student participants’ parents did not want their children to participate in the focus groups for fear that their child would be labeled as low-income by their peers. After the interviews and focus group, the data were reviewed and member-checked to ensure that all of the information that was gathered was accurate. I used the qualitative research software, NVivo 12, to identify reoccurring themes and codes. Table 2 provides the frequency of codes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups.
Table 2

*Code Frequency*

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**Curriculum and Teaching.** Many of the participants indicated that the adopted curriculum and style of teaching impact whether or not students will be motivated in their classrooms. Some participants felt that most teachers do the best they can in the classroom with
the resources they have; however, other participants felt there was a need for a more diverse curriculum and style of teaching.

**Textbooks.** The topic of textbooks came up several times during the interviews. Several of the teacher participants discussed how important it was for students to enjoy what they are reading. Participants believed that if students enjoy the text, they will be more motivated to read. Although the participants are allowed to use outside resources, some felt that to be a more inclusive school system, the textbooks should be diverse. Amanda stated, “I use the curriculum that I am supposed to use. I mean I kind of have to. It is not like they necessarily make us. We just know the adopted curriculum is something they check for.” When I reviewed the lesson plan documentation, all of the reading lesson plans heavily referenced the county curriculum. Only one lesson plan referenced the use of an outside resource. Participants indicated that the diversity of textbooks would help increase student motivation. Sarah stated:

I am not going to lie, but a lot of those stories are not very interesting. My students read them, but it is like pulling teeth to get them to do it. This is why I work closely with some of the other teachers to find other stories that I think my students would like.

Blaire mentioned that the textbooks she uses in her classrooms are appropriate for her students. She felt that her students enjoy them: “I like the curriculum that we use. Of course, there are pros and cons with everything. My lovebugs like the stories.” One of the student participants, Sharon, stated, “I love to read books about big animals. We read about animals, but we have to read the stories from our hardback reader.”

**Reading.** The participants indicated that the concept of reading is a process where both the student and teachers must be involved. However, the participants faced challenges that made it difficult for them to teach reading effectively. Blaire stated, “I notice that a lot of my students
have been diagnosed with ADHD, which does make it difficult for them to concentrate when I am trying to teach a new skill.” Kayla stated, “I’ve noticed that there is a lack of home support and that the attitude towards reading is negative. Many students today would much rather watch a movie or play a game than read a book. We just can’t compete.” Some participants indicated that their experience teaching reading to low-SES African American students was different from teaching students from different racial and social classes. Aspen mentioned,

> It is hard to motivate students to read if they never see their parents read. Some parents work. Like work hard all day. Some have two jobs and well... some don’t have any jobs. But still... with smaller kids, you are teaching them how to read. So, when they get older, if they haven’t seen an adult in their life reading it is hard to show them that reading is important and can be really fun.

Peyton stated that he has a hard time teaching reading to his students because of their reading level. He said, “When they get to fifth grade, we hope they can comprehend, but their ability to comprehend the stories or novels we read is very limited.” Aspen also stated, “I know my students may be more motivated to read if their parents were, but the lack of home support puts more pressure on me to help them.”

**Books.** Another code that came up regarding curriculum and teaching was books. Incorporating meaningful literature into weekly and monthly units was important to the participants. Amanda stated, “I love books. During my morning read aloud, I always bring in my favorite books to share with my students. We have the best time.” Zamaria stated, “My teacher is crazy. She makes funny voices when she reads. We laugh when she reads funny books.” A few of the teachers stated how incorporating books helps motivate students to read. Sarah mentioned the importance of finding books that students like to read. She said:
It is so funny because we know how important it is to read books to our students, but I don’t know…sometimes I don’t feel like I have time. I do try! I put more emphasis on them reading and sharing. Like every two months, well before COVID, we did book reviews and readers cafe. This was so good because the students did this 100% on their own. COVID and our inconsistent and short schedules have made it hard.

Aerial mentioned that Accelerated Reader was one of her favorite programs. She said, “If you read a book and take one of the AR tests, you can get a lot of points. I am trying to save my points to win an iPad.” On the other hand, Jacob did not find reading interesting to him. Jacob stated, “I don’t like to read.” As he discussed reading, he barely made eye contact and kept his head down. He continued his statement and said, “My teacher doesn’t help us.”

**Student Choice.** The participants agreed that giving their students the ability to make choices helps when it comes to teaching. Amanda stated, “We sure could learn from our students if we spent more time listening to what they wanted to do.” She indicated that the best way to learn about her students is by having them lead the conversations and finding out what they want to learn. She said, “I know what I like. I need to know what they like. I have happier learners when I do this. There is too much riffraff with teaching. It is much simpler if we just ask and talk to students.” Peyton felt that creating a positive atmosphere and providing students with choices helps motivate all of his students. He said:

I want my classroom to be welcoming. I have lamps and create a warm environment.

Some of my students have hard home lives. When they come to school, I just don’t want them to think of it as a place they have to be but more so… like… as a place they want to be. I ask them their opinions, and they are honest about what they don’t like.
Sarah also felt that giving her students the ability to make choices helps her design her lesson plans. She said, “Journal writing is my favorite. I read my students journals because it lets me know what they like. I use those journals to learn about my students, which does help me write lessons that they may like.”

**Black Historical Figures.** The participants were asked how they create a culturally responsive environment for their low-SES African American students. Several of them discussed how incorporating Black historical figures into their reading lessons increases student motivation to read. Kayla stated, “I think it is important to celebrate all cultures, so I try to talk about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. as often as I can into my lessons.” Susan stated, “I try to mix and shake it up. A lot of my students are Black or mixed. We know how important it is to talk about Frederick Douglass and people like that, but I love to read books.”

Aspen discussed her perceptions of culturally responsive environments. Although Aspen tries to learn about her students, she felt that other teachers do not. She said, “I don’t really have a lot of behavior problems in my classroom.” She continued to discuss student–teacher relationships. She stated,

> We know how powerful student–teacher relationships are. Students will pretty much at least try to do something for you…well if they like you. Some of these teachers know nothing about their students. They sort of have their minds made up about their students because they know their parents or the student’s siblings.

Peyton echoed the same belief and stated, “I know some teachers mean well. I just wish they understood that our students are more than what they think they are.” Peyton continued to share his beliefs about motivating African American students to read by incorporating texts that the
students can relate to. He said, “I guess I just feel it is my responsibility to teach my students how to read. You won’t enjoy reading if you don’t like what you are reading.”

Culture. Participants indicated that understanding how to motivate low-SES African American students to read had a great deal to do with understanding their students’ culture. Some participants felt the difference in cultures within their building and area makes it challenging to create inclusive learning environments.

Black Students. The participants indicated that there was a difference between teaching students from different backgrounds. Amanda spoke at length about her perceptions of the achievement gap for African American students and students of other races. She stated:

I have lived here my whole life, and I know that it has been hard for non-White people to do things. I am not trying to be forward; I just think we…White people…have created this gap. I don’t know how to say things without being offensive, but I do know that I was given more than the other Black students in my class. It may be a little better now, but it will take time to close a gap if we don’t work on fixing it now.

Amanda continued to discuss her teaching career. She stated, “I contributed to the achievement gap. I had a perception about things. Back in the day, I did what I was told. These young teachers now do what is right.” Aspen shared a similar concern:

It’s almost like they think they can’t [learn] because everyone else has told them…well you know you’re Black, you’re poor, you’re not going to make it. You can’t do that. So yeah…as their teacher, I have to tell them that they are smart. They can do it. They have all the skills. It’s almost like you have to break the shell they are in.

Susan discussed the achievement gap and her perception and stated, “I would hope and like to think that everyone has the same opportunities but statistically speaking, the numbers are there.”
She continued to state that she believed that “it is what pushes you and drives you to be better.”

Susan also mentioned that she noticed more of an emphasis on African Americans wanting to be successful at playing sports than academics. She stated, “you know…they will give everything they have to play basketball, but when it comes to academics the same passion is not there.”

Peyton echoed a similar statement and said, “A lot of my Black students only talk about growing up to be a professional basketball or football player. They don’t believe they can do or be something else.” He continued to discuss the conversations he has had with his Black students’ parents. He said, “I sometimes feel like they want to help their child do something greater than what they did, but they don’t really believe in the system. They are there for their kids but in a different way.”

White Students. The participants also spent a great deal of time discussing their Caucasian students as they discussed their African American students. The comparisons occurred several times throughout the research study. During the focus group, the participants were asked questions about the achievement gap in education and motivational strategies. Sarah stated, “I know there is an achievement gap between races, but I am very concerned about the achievement gap between social classes. I feel like all of my low-income students think that same way regardless of race.” Kayla followed up in agreement with this statement. She said, “I do agree with that statement. I know we…well I should probably say society…puts a lot of emphasis on race. I just think we have much bigger issues when it comes to social classes in our area.” During Amanda’s interview, she had a different perspective about achievement gaps that she did not share during the focus group. She stated,
I don’t think anyone is trying to say one [social class vs. race] is more important than the other. It is just a fact that our White students, no matter if they are poor or rich, will be looked at differently than our Black students, no matter if they are rich or poor.

The participants continued to discuss how their students are motivated in their classrooms. During Blaire’s interview, she stated that her students are all younger, so her motivational approach is different. She said, “I don’t think my White students think any different than my Black students. Most all of the girls in my classrooms love the same thing, and my boys love sports.” On the other hand, during Aspen’s interview, she stated:

I love reading to my students. I can’t assume that my Black students will like the same stories that I read aloud to my White students and vice versa. I mean, they might, but I just can’t assume it is going to happen.

*Generational Poverty.* Many of the participants discussed how generational poverty affects the mindset of their students. Amanda stated, “The same students who were low-income when I had them now have their own children who are also considered low-income. It is a never-ending cycle.” Susan also discussed her perceptions of how low-income students’ culture is different from others. She said:

We all know that education is one of the only ways to end generational poverty. I grew up poor and knew I did not want to be poor when I grew up. My friends didn’t know I was poor. The only reason I was able to go to college was because I watched what they did.

Sarah shared her experience with generational poverty within her classroom. She stated:

I do feel sad for my low-socioeconomic students. When our schools first shut down due to the pandemic, we delivered food to families we knew would need it. It was
heartbreaking driving up and down some of these neighborhoods. Two of my families had grandparents and aunts and uncles living with them in really small homes.

**Racism.** A few of the participants noted their perceptions about how unintentional racism affects their African American students’ performance in school. Aspen discussed her viewpoints on this topic. During her interview, she shared the following, “I can see how teachers make judgments about their students before they even get them. I see it all the time.” Peyton also echoed a similar experience in his school. He stated, “I can tell by some of my colleague’s Facebook posts that they have a bias against people of other races. I don’t even get it. How can you teach Black students and think that way?” One of the student participants also shared his beliefs about his teachers. Jacob stated, “She doesn’t like Black kids. She will always threaten us and say if we don’t listen, we will end up in alternative ed. We all know about this lady. My sisters had her too.”

**Stereotypes.** Participants noted that stereotypes were one reason they believed that there was an achievement gap between low-SES African American students and students of other races. They believed that teachers’ preconceived notions contributed to why some students lack the motivation to do well in the classroom. Stereotypes also impact the relationships that teachers have with students. Furthermore, the stereotypes that teachers have about their student will affect their teaching practices.

**Slang.** The language used in the classroom by students with different cultures often affects the mindset that teachers have about students. Sarah stated, “There are some students who speak a different way, and they are instantly judged for this language.” Sarah continued to express that students who feel isolated do not feel like they are a part of the classroom environment. During Kayla’s interview, she stated:
There is a teacher that I work with that hates when students say “what’s up” to one another. It seems that only our Black students greet each other this way. If she heard this, she corrects them. At first, the students would apologize, but I think they do it now to make her mad. They aren’t saying anything wrong. They are kids. I say “what’s up” all the time, and I am an adult.

Amanda also commented on the stereotypes that she sees at her school. She stated, “I think in this area more teachers associate slang with our Black students than our White students. Students are a product of their environment. Just because they use slang doesn’t mean they are bad students.”

**Low-SES Students.** School support personnel have systems in place to assist families that may need additional assistance or resources. The participants felt that this was an asset to the school system; however, they also thought that these support systems could cause teachers to have a bias about their students’ families and contribute to stereotypes. Amanda stated:

> We are a Title I school, so we know that according to county rankings, we have a lot of low-income students. Our association with being a Title I school comes up a lot in discussions. It is like we are only known for teaching low-income students.

Even though the participants find themselves trying to find different ways to describe their students, all of the teacher participants had a different perspective on teaching low-SES students. Kayla shared, “Our students do need a lot of support. The area needs a lot of support. Since the city has brought in more jobs, I have noticed our clientele is starting to change a bit.”

Throughout the focus group, the teachers continued to share other stories about the perceptions and stereotypes about low-SES students. Participants expressed their concerns with how these stereotypes carry over to the classroom and how teacher expectations for low-SES students
decreases because of the child’s income level and home environment. During Kayla’s interview, she mentioned that she felt sorry for her low-SES students, and her main goal was for them to be happy while they are at school. She did not share this same statement during the focus group.

**Supportive Teachers.** All of the teacher participants shared that feeling safe and having a positive relationship with students has a powerful impact on students’ learning. This positive rapport can also increase the child’s eagerness to do well. Students who feel like they are a part of a supportive environment will be more motivated to learn. Students must have a mutually respectful relationship built with the person who is providing the motivation.

**Motivation.** Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are important components of student achievement. Students must reach a level of independence where they feel motivated to read on their own. Participants felt that student–teacher relationships could be used to motivate students. During Aerial’s interview, she spent a lot of time talking about Accelerated Reader and her goal of winning an iPad. She also associated the positive side of reading with her teachers. She stated, “When I was in kindergarten, we would have circle time, and my teacher would read to us. She used a puppet that talked. I don’t think it talked. It was her hand. It was funny. I love Mrs. Watson.” Zamaria also shared a similar experience. She stated:

> I was in first grade, and my teacher would let us read our own books after lunch. She would let us go to the bathroom and get a drink. We got to read until everyone went to the bathroom. After we finished, she would give us peppermint sticks and let us talk to our friends about our books. She would share her books with us.

The participants continued to discuss the opportunities they were given to read in the classroom. Based on the student interviews, the students who shared positive reading experiences had a
positive relationship with their teachers. In contrast, the students who did not like their reading teachers had a negative association with their teachers. Jacob shared the following:

I guess I never really like to read. I do read, but I don’t really like to. We have to read a lot. When we don’t have school, all of my teachers make us read a lot and watch a lot of videos on Schoology. Ms. Michaels didn’t make us do that last year. She would help me.

Teacher participants shared positive and negative experiences about student–teacher relationships and reading motivation during the focus group. Peyton stated, “I love to talk to my students about what they are reading. They are at a level where we can share these types of things.” During Sarah’s interview, she shared:

I know I am supposed to give my students time to read for pleasure, but at my level, we have to spend so much time teaching our kids how to read that it seems like I don’t get the chance. It is really heartbreaking and discouraging when I send decodables home with my students, and their parents don’t read with them. I also have to look at my babies in their faces when they see all their other classmates gaining all these skills, and they still struggle with basic phonics and phonemic awareness. Our class sizes just aren’t small enough. It is overwhelming.

Love. The most common theme between the teachers and the students was the concept of love. All of the teacher participants indicated that they love what they do, and they love watching and helping their students grow. The student participants also indicated the same thing. In several of the interviews, the students shared similar stories about teachers they really liked, which positively impacted their lives. Sharon spent a lot of time talking about her second-grade teacher. She stated, “She was my favorite teacher. She never yelled at us. She would even play with us at recess.” Jacob indicated the same thing about this second-grade teacher. He stated, “My second-
grade teacher would buy basketballs and footballs for the treasure box. She would show me at the beginning of the week. They were the good ones too.” During Kayla’s interview, she shared the following:

I have always worked with kids. I think that is why I love my job so much. I know the home lives that some of these kids have. I want to make their time at school enjoyable. I love all my students. You develop such a different bond with each of them. You don’t really get it unless you’ve been in our shoes.

All of the teacher participants agreed that ensuring students feeling loved and accepted can positively impact students’ well-being. During the focus group, the teachers discussed how their low-SES students had different needs than their higher-income students. Aspen shared:

People sometimes think students who come from a higher social class come to school ready to go. In a way, they do. But I notice that sometimes my high-income students are the ones who need that reassurance more than my lower-income students.

Amanda stated, “All of these kids have more needs than people realize. The focus is always on state test scores. If they only really knew what we had to do on a daily basis.”

**Attitude.** One of teachers’ main goals is to create an environment where students want to be actively involved. To achieve this goal, teachers must create environments that will help their students develop positive attitudes towards reading. During Randolph’s interview, he shared that he did not like to read; however, he did not have a negative attitude about school. He shared, “I don’t like to read. I hate to read. I am really good at math.” When he was asked what he liked about math, he said, “I don’t know. My teacher is also really good at math. She said that she liked math better than reading.” Susan stated during her interview, “All kids are different, but I
believe it is our job as teachers to find that sweet spot. Find what they like and build them up for them.”

**Experiences.** Participants discussed how their different levels of experiences have taught them how to handle classroom situations. Susan stated:

I feel like I grow every year from teaching. I also feel like after these interviews, I may need to do some additional research about how I am supporting my students. I like to think that I am a good teacher and that I do give my best. I can think of tons of times I have made mistakes in my career, but I have learned from them. I try not to beat myself up over things I can’t change. I just work hard to fix things whenever I learn something new.

The focus group discussion provided an opportunity for the participants to discuss how they have learned to work with their population groups. Blaire shared, “I have taught at Lakewood for several years. I can already tell that what I do with my students is different from what some of you do with yours. I don’t think there is really a right or wrong way to do things as long as you try your best.”

**Support System.** The support that low-SES African American students receive is imperative for their growth and development. The participants agreed that several factors can positively or negatively affect students.

**Parents.** Jacob one of the participants who shared very little about his teachers; however, he shared a great deal about how supportive his mom and aunt are. When he was asked to talk about himself, he spoke about his mom. He stated, “My mom always tries to help me with my homework. I have to show her my planner.” He also shared about how his mom attends his basketball and football games. Aerial shared a similar story about her aunt. She stated, “My aunt
picks me up from school because my mom has to work. She helps me with my homework. I don’t always have homework.” One of the things that the participants noted about their low-SES students was that their support system seems much larger than their other students. Sarah mentioned:

Before COVID, I would try to set up reoccurring parent–teacher meetings. A lot of my parents of my low-SES students would have grandparents, aunts, or uncles attend if they [parents] couldn’t be there. I guess it is great that they have someone there, but there wasn’t a clear line of communication. The child also went somewhere different every day. It was hard to keep up with schedules.

**Grandparents.** The role that grandparents play in the lives of low-SES African American students was evident throughout the interview and focus groups. Randolph stated, “I was really happy when my parents got to go with me to the Greenbrier. I thought my grandad would have to take me because my mom and dad work at the same store.” Three of the teacher participants mentioned in their interviews how grandparents were an integral part of their low-SES students’ lives. Sarah stated:

I know it feels like I may be beating a dead horse, but I am always shocked at the number of students being raised by grandparents. Surely this wasn’t always the case. More than half of my class is being raised by their grandparents. I feel like I can never get a hold of the child’s parents, and some of these parents don’t even work.

**Influences.** Teachers are influential and can have a great impact on academic achievement. Participants agreed that attendance, behavior, and social media contribute to the academic success of their students and the perceptions and viewpoints they develop about school. These influences are an integral part of student learning.
**Attendance.** Participants discussed the impact that regular attendance has on their low-SES African American students. Aside from students coming to school to receive a quality education, the teachers and students discussed how regular school attendance and consistent routines help to provide a sense of stability. Randolph said, “I liked not coming to school at first. Then it got really boring to stay at home. We weren’t allowed to go to the rec either.” Jacob discussed how not coming to school affected his grades. He stated, “I had to stay home and do a bunch of worksheets. We didn’t have meetings last year. We did this year. They are a joke.” One of the teacher participants, Blaire, discussed how the inconsistent schedule impacted her low-SES students. She stated:

COVID has not been fun for anyone. Our students don’t just come to school to learn. We are a safe haven for our lovebugs. The inconsistencies this year have been very hard on everyone, but I think our students have suffered the most. We know that our parents didn’t work with our students before COVID. Now we are expecting them to assist us while our students are remote. In a perfect world, that would have worked.

Kayla added to the conversation. She said, “We all know that school is absolutely important. COVID has really reaffirmed how important school and regular attendance are for our students. If they aren’t here, they won’t make it on their own. Well, considering the conditions of some.”

**Behavior.** Positive reinforcement and acknowledging tasks that students perform well has a positive influence on student behaviors. The expectations that teachers have regarding schoolwide and classroom management procedures should align. The participants discussed how having schoolwide expectations can have a positive influence on all of their students. Peyton stated:
For the most part, I feel like we do try as a school to make sure we are enforcing the same rules and procedures schoolwide. It is necessary that our students have consistency from one grade level to the next.

During Susan’s interview, she discussed how she had handled behaviors in her classroom. She stated, “I have worked with all kinds of students. Some of the most challenging students have been my Black students. I don’t mean that how it sounds. I just mean it has taken me longer to learn their ways.” Jacob felt that the pressure he received from his teachers had to do with the color of his skin. He shared:

I hate my school. I don’t like going. I get in trouble for the same thing that these White kids do, but I am the one who gets in trouble. My bus driver does the same things. My White friends say that same thing.

**Black Lives Matter.** A few of the participants noted their perceptions about how unintentional racism affects African American students’ performance at school. Teachers compared the topic of the Twin Towers and the Black Lives Matter movement. During Peyton’s interview, he stated, “I feel like we pick and choose what is appropriate to talk about. As a society, we don’t really like to talk about controversial topics. It’s not right.” Susan also shared her beliefs about this situation. She stated, “We put too much weight into social media. I just feel like people should be able to have their own opinions without being judged. We have become way too critical about things.”

**Research Question Responses**

This study’s research questions focused on the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980), the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), and the achievement gap in reading between African Americans and students of other races. I formed these questions to highlight teachers’ and students’ perceptions of
instructional and motivational practices that influence reading development. The data collected from the documentation, interviews, and focus group were used to create codes that helped with the development of themes.

Research Question 1. Research Question 1 asked: “What instructional strategies and methods are teachers using to build the motivational levels of their students?” Establishing a classroom environment where students can recognize the effects of their choices is one of the key factors in creating an environment conducive to learning. The participants all felt that the strategies and methods that they use in their classroom help to build the motivational levels of their students. Aspen shared the following:

At my level, we focus a lot on reading to learn. I like to give the kids something to read that doesn’t necessarily make sense until they put it together. This year has been hard because of COVID and the social distancing but giving them something where they have to become an expert. Then they go teach that concept to someone else. I then like for them to share with me that they have learned. They really like that because they believe they are teaching me things I don’t know, and it excites them.

Ryan and Deci (1980) believed that when people are completing a task that relates and connects to the person, they are more likely to develop their intrinsic motivation. Zamaria shared the following, “I like to read books that are funny. My teacher will let me know which books in the reading bin are funny.” Amanda shared, “It is like pulling teeth trying to get some of my students to do certain things. I learned early on to use interest surveys with my students. It helps to review these when planning.” Kayla discussed what she does to help motivate her students. She stated:

I try to get out good books that they like. I try to make the stories come to life. About two week ago we go out our lap books with fairytales, and they really enjoyed that. I also like
to bring out the art supplies. The don’t get to do that a lot. So, if I can make art and reading come together, that really works well. The fairytales were a big hit, and I was able to let them read the Grimm’s Tales.

Sarah shared the following about the motivation reading strategies she uses in her classroom:

First off, I always start with read alouds, and I find funny books. Entertaining books. Things that are going to excite them about reading. So, once I build the excitement with the read alouds and I have them start reading, I still pick things that are going to interest them. Because if it is not interesting, it is boring. Once I can get their excitement with reading, it is just hitting that and breaking it up into small flexible groups based on skills. I still have students that don’t know their sight words and stumble on words when they are reading, so I have to work on their confidence levels. I try to keep those students with an easier text on their level and go through it and hit it every day and flash those sights words. We try to make it fun for them with games.

Participants agreed that building their students’ motivational levels does require the teacher to help build their confidence level (Stroet et al., 2015). Aerial shared how getting student of the month increased her motivation in the classroom. She stated:

I was really happy when I got student of the month. I like my teacher. She gives me coins and moves my clip. I never get below green. Some kids do, but I don’t. I got pink too and purple and we get a trophy on our desk when we get pink. We don’t keep it.

Sharon also had a similar experience in her classroom. She shared, “I try to get a pizza. When we read and my teacher gives me stickers, so we can win a pizza from Pizza Hut. My mom has to sign my folder too.” These quotes indicate that Sharon and Aerial are extrinsically motivated.

During Peyton’s interview, he shared what he does to motivate his students. He stated:
I do a lot of different things with my kids. I try to provide my students with choices. I really don’t have a lot of issues trying to get them to be motivated to do things because I really try to establish good and solid relationships with my students. I don’t know. I don’t get the refusal from students like a lot of other teachers do. They just complete task and will work for me. I don’t know. I only really ever had the issue with my students not being motivated to do things my second year of teaching.

**Research Question 2.** Research Question 2 asked: “What methods are teachers using to link their student’s beliefs with the desired behavioral outcomes?” Students who are completing a task must value and understand the importance of the task (Ajzen, 1991). Students become empowered when they have the opportunity to make choices. Participants shared what they do in their classrooms to relate the content they are teaching with behavioral outcomes. Aerial shared, “We did this periodic table thing with Black History, and it was fun. I never did anything like it before. The news came. We were just a little bit nervous.” Blair shared:

> There is a lot of trial and error in my classroom. You really have to figure out what works with your group. You know…they are all different and you have to change it up and do things differently if it doesn’t work.

Ensuring that student voices are heard and understood were additional factors that helped teachers reach certain outcomes in their classroom. Susan shared the following:

> I don’t really use one specific thing in my classroom. I think with every teacher there is a lot of questioning throughout lessons. I like to stop and ask my students questions and get their opinions about things. I like for kids to tell me why they think something happened. I like for them to make predications and foreshadow things. If I am wanting my students
to do something in particular, I have to keep them interested and engaged or else I won’t have a successful lesson.

The teachers agreed that they want to build their students’ intrinsic motivation; with every lesson, they have goals they want to achieve. Kayla discussed how mentioning the end of the year testing can have a negative impact on student learning. She shared:

We obviously want our students to do well on the end of the year test. I get it. But my students are sick of hearing it. I never tell my students that what they are doing is going to help them with their end of the year testing. To me…it is a moot point. I choose not to harp on it. It is stressful and not the only factor to determine what students learn. If a child does something and they don’t think they will do well, it becomes extremely difficult to shift the mindset and get buy in from students. I focus on the can and move forward from there.

**Research Question 3.** Research Question 3 asked: “What factors contribute to low-SES African American students’ success in reading?” The inequalities in education are prevalent, and the participants recognized an achievement gap in education. Although some participants felt there was a more widespread achievement gap between races, others thought that the achievement gaps in their classroom were between social classes. Camera (2015) stated that understanding poverty, cognition, and relationship building could help teachers narrow the achievement gap. The participants were asked what success they have had in teaching low-SES African students to read. Kayla shared:

I find myself trying to find different ways to find books to celebrate different colors and different cultures. And I teach the kids about as many different things as I can. You know, like they’ll say, well, Lincoln was my favorite president because he freed the
slaves and I’m like well, is that all you know about him? And I also tried to tell him that slavery was not just in the United States and that it is still going on. They can’t wrap their heads around people in this word being sold into slavery. So, I really am fascinated, and I have had to mediate these discussions. I don’t care to have these conversations with my students. My best things to do is be honest. I don’t feel like other teachers are comfortable having those conversations. I told someone earlier about this interview and they shared that they didn’t want to do it. I think people are scared of offending someone. And they don’t have experience with anyone except for White people. I have experience with people…you go to college and meet different people. I feel like in this area a lot of people don’t have that and that scares them. I have taught Black kids and I have taught White kids and there is a difference between cultures.

One of the student participants, Randolph, shared an experience in his classroom that attributed to a successful reading experience. He shared, “I missed school to go to the Greenbrier. I had to share with my class what we did while we were there. My teacher let me borrow a book about the Greenbrier, and it had a lot of pictures.” During Sarah’s interview, there was a lot of discussion about success in reading and the achievement gap. She shared:

I think it is really just…I mean…I know there is data out there to show that. I know that. But I think it has more to do with the socioeconomic status. I really think it is mainly to do with the economic status. Because that can be anyone. And I guess from historical areas the Black side of town is always poor. If you look at the houses…if you go through Belmont area…you can see the rich, White areas and the poor Black areas. I mean…you can see that today. I guess it is generational and people not…I don’t know. I don’t know
if it a nature versus nurture and people not seeing anything other than what is being passed down to them. I really just don’t know. I wish I knew. But I don’t.

**Research Question 4.** Research Question 4 asked: “How can teachers cultivate a reading environment where they are culturally responsive and can support low-SES African American students?” The achievement gap between African American students and other races continues to widen (National Education Association, 2019b). Culturally sensitive teachers acknowledge diversity and seek to develop students who understand the world around them. Aspen was asked what the term culturally responsive meant to her, and she stated, “I would say just how people, in general, respond to something based on the way they were raised and the environment they grew up in.” Aspen shared the following when asked how teachers can create an environment that is culturally responsive to low-SES African American students:

I would say that relationships and getting to know my kids is important. My very first year here, there was somebody that made a comment to me because a kid said, “Hey I have to ax you something” and I was like “ok” and I responded to him. The other teachers were telling me that I needed to correct the student. I didn’t feel like I needed to. The kid wasn’t writing a paper and he wasn’t in a job interview. It is perfectly acceptable, at least in my eyes, for him to say ax instead of the word ask. It is important for me to teach him when it is appropriate for him to use slang versus when it is not appropriate.

Kurdi et al. (2018) discussed the importance of students needing to have a sense of fulfillment whenever they work in the classroom. For this to occur, teachers must be mindful of their students’ home life and communities (Anderson, 2016). Additionally, teachers have to recognize that students do not all have the same history. Peyton stated:
I try to…when you know…if you are doing history topics, I try to have two outlooks and two different opinions of situations. I have a few units where I teach time periods. If we talk about middle class American in the 50s and 60s, that’s going to be a totally different view you have for the Civil Rights Movement. And that is kind of what we do.

Susan added to this conversation by sharing her experiences and what she does to create a culturally responsive environment for her low-SES students. She stated, “Number one. I feel like getting to know them. Getting to know their backgrounds. Getting to know their families. Letting them know you care about them. That even goes with being in touch with the families.” During Susan’s interview, a follow-up question was asked regarding her response to making sure students know that she is not out to get them. She was asked if her students felt like other teachers were out to get them. She responded:

Yes. We have had kids go to different grade levels. We sometimes get from parents that they had a terrible year last year and their child didn’t want to come to school. You know there are some teachers that yell, and I can’t do it.

Susan also discussed that she felt there were teachers she worked with who had racial undertones. She shared, “I do think some teachers have favorites, and it is very easy to see. And. Umm…if we are being honest. I have never seen this teacher have a Black student as their favorite.” Anderson (2016) discussed how providing African American students with appropriate representation in the classroom can increase student learning. The student participants were asked about the books they read in their classrooms and the characters in these books. All of the student participants mentioned either the genres of books or described the characters’ personalities within the books. Zamaria said, “We read a new story every week. We do skip
sometimes for science.” Sharon had a similar response. She stated, “After we read our story, we have to take a test on Friday. We get free time on our iPad after our test.”

**Research Question 5.** Research Question 5 asked: “What are Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of effective instructional and motivational strategies?” Many different factors can determine student success. If teachers have difficulty understanding their students’ backgrounds, the likelihood of student success is minimal (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). During the focus group, the teachers shared their perceptions about the instructional and motivational strategies that were more effective in teaching their African American students to read. Sarah stated, “developing relationships are [sic] very important.”

Aspen stated:

I teach older kids, so I am a with the bigger kiddos. Umm…but I think it is extremely important to put the right people in front of students. And I think it is so easy because kids are kids, and they listen to what they shouldn’t, and they want to be cool. And you know…they’re listening to Cardi B and they are watching these things on TV. Umm….and they think in their head they think “Oh they look like me. I want to be like them.” So, to me it is important, especially for my African American students, to put people who look like them and say, “This is what you haven't thought of that you can do. You know, Shaquille O'Neal has his doctorate degree. You know, Steph Curry, even though he's one of the best in the NBA, he still practices every single day as if he wasn't the best.” You know and giving them real life examples that are relevant to them personally, on a personal level.

During Aerial’s interview, she shared, “I like when we get to pick our groups, and we chose from our teachers’ list about what we want to learn. That is so fun. We get to work in groups.” Sarah also
shared very similar instructional and motivational strategies that she uses in her classroom. She stated:

Like, when I think of that, I think of role models. People who are current that they could look up. Because…yeah reading texts…we have a lot of good stories and you know they try to make it multicultural and mix and match but some of that stuff is about people who are long gone and dead and these kids don't care about that. You got to get them into the topic that they’re interested about.

Some participants felt that some inequalities in education were directly related to teachers not knowing how to work with students from different backgrounds. Other participants had a different perspective on the situation. Blaire shared the following:

Our school doesn’t have a large ratio of African American students. I don’t think my Black students learn any different from other races. Honestly, I think that a low-SES regardless of race…is…they both struggle the same way. A lot of times I will notice…not just with African American students…but with all low-SES students that they are very transient. I just think that building relationships and the rapport that you have with students is the best way to increase motivation and success.

Low-SES students will thrive in classrooms if they feel safe to express their concerns and how they feel without receiving judgment from those around them (Hornstra et al., 2015). Susan shared:

It's very important for us to facilitate an atmosphere where their opinions matter their thoughts matter. They are important. And even if it’s a controversial issue, I think that those need to be talked about. They need to be able to see both sides of the picture and come up with things on their own.
The student participants were asked what types of stories they shared with their teachers and classmates about their lives. Aerial stated, “When I was in kindergarten, we had share time. We don’t really do that anymore.” Zamaria shared, “I talk to my friends. Just about things we like. I don’t know. Umm…just at recess and on the bus. We talk.” Jacob shared the following:

I mean…we don’t really talk to the teachers. I say good morning or bye, but we don’t talk like that. We have to do work…because the teachers have work we need to do. I guess I talk to my friends some. We do talk. Yeah. We talk about sports.

Summary

I conducted this case study to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students in the southern region of West Virginia to read. I collected data from documentation, which included lesson plans, anecdotal notes, and weekly newsletters. I also conducted interviews via video conference with the teacher and student participants, and conducted a focus group with the teacher participants. To protect the participants’ privacy, pseudonyms were given to the study participants and the locations mentioned.

The study data were compiled, disassembled, reassembled, and then interpreted. All of the data were professionally transcribed using Rev and the Microsoft Teams’ embedded software. Six themes emerged: (a) curriculum and teaching, (b) culture, (c) stereotypes, (d) supportive teaching, (e) support systems, and (f) influences. I used the data to answer the five research questions, which focused on understanding the perceptions that Caucasian teachers and African American students have about effective instructional and motivational strategies. The study results indicated that many of the teacher participants had a great understanding of what they needed to do to ensure that their low-SES students were successful in the classroom.
However, teacher participants had a minimal understanding of effective instructional strategies to use when working with African American students. The knowledge gained from this case study will help other educators understand effective instructional and motivational strategies that are necessary to motivate low-SES African American students to read.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The achievement gap in education continues to be more significant amongst African Americans students than students of other races (Camera, 2015). Despite the efforts put into trying to help unrepresented groups reach the same level of academic success as their counterparts, statistical evidence indicates that the achievement gap between White students and minority students continues to widen. Teachers must understand what instructional and motivational strategies are most effective in the classroom (Webb & Thomas, 2015). The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students to read in the southern region of West Virginia.

This chapter provides a summary of the findings in relation to the research questions. I also discuss the methodological and practical implications as related to the literature and the theories presented within this case study. Lastly, the delimitations and limitations of the case study are identified, and recommendations for future research studies are discussed.

Summary of Findings

The study findings were developed from the central research question. The central research question focused on how teachers can create a culturally responsive reading environment in their classroom to support their low-SES African American students. All of the teacher participants indicated that an achievement gap in education exists. Although some of the teacher participants suggested that the achievement gap was between races, others felt that they noticed more of an achievement gap between students of different SES.
The first research question asked, “What instructional strategies and methods are teachers using to build the motivational levels of their students?” The participants felt that providing their students the opportunity to make choices and be actively involved helps build their students’ motivational levels. Slavin (2015) believed the students from low-SES backgrounds need direct teaching, and teachers must present lessons with an enthusiastic and caring demeanor. The participants also discussed how imperative it was to allow their students to read books they are interested in. This approach helps to increase reading interests, growth, and development. Participants shared that they use small flexible reading groups and increase focus on skill development among students who are having difficulty or still need additional support. This strategy not only builds student–teacher relationships, but also increases the student’s self-confidence.

The second research question asked, “What methods are teachers using to link their student’s beliefs with the desired behavioral outcomes?” The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) distinguishes between behaviors related to social pressures and self-efficacy. These behaviors can be positive and negative. The majority of the participants shared how the most effective lessons are where students understand and value the tasks they are being asked to complete. If the task relates to the student, there is a greater chance that the student will have ownership of the task. Asking students questions and allowing them to share their ideas with others helps teachers determine what students think.

The third research question asked, “What factors contribute to low-SES African American students’ success in reading?” Participants felt that there were inequalities in education. For teachers to narrow the achievement gap, they must have an in-depth understanding of poverty, student cognition, and positive student–teacher relationships (Camera,
2015). All of the teacher participants understood the need to incorporate lessons that focus on celebrating other cultures and backgrounds. One participant discussed her beliefs on why teachers are uncomfortable having conversations about race within their classrooms. This participant felt that most of the teachers in the area only have experiences with White people, which makes it difficult for them to understand Black culture. Bean-Folkes and Ellison (2018) indicated that teachers do recognize disparities between races in education; however, Howard (2018) stated that teachers find it easier to ignore being culturally responsive and neglect updating their pedagogy because race is an uncomfortable topic.

The fourth research question asked, “How can teachers cultivate a reading environment where they are culturally responsive and can support low-SES African American students?” Participants shared the importance of being culturally sensitive and acknowledging diversity. A safe environment is created when students can express themselves openly in the classroom without judgment. Furthermore, incorporating lessons that offer various viewpoints makes it easier for students to share their own opinions without judgment from others. Gershenson and Dee (2017) discussed how interventions such as perspective-taking strategies could help create an empathic classroom environment. All of the participants referenced how building relationships helps fosters a positive learning environment.

The fifth research question asked, “What are Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of effective instructional and motivational strategies?” Recognizing and understanding students’ backgrounds is one of the most important ways to build relationships in the classroom. The exposure that students have with the media is not always positive, making it even more challenging to ensure that African American students are exposed to positive role models. Some of the participants shared that they faced challenges with their low-SES students
being transient. As a result, teachers spend more time trying to get these students caught up and on grade level. Although the teacher participants felt that they incorporate different backgrounds and cultures in their classroom, the student participants did not indicate that the literature in their classroom represented them. Bean-Folkes and Ellison (2018) believed that one way to empower students is to select text relevant to the reader.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this case study was to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students in the southern region of West Virginia to read. I reviewed documentation such as lesson plans, weekly newsletters, and anecdotal notes. Additionally, I interviewed students and teachers individually and conducted a focus group with the teacher participants. The population for this study was Caucasian teachers and low-SES African American students between second and sixth grade. Table 1 in Chapter 4 provides an overview of the participants. I compiled, disassembled, and reassembled the data on several different occasions to ensure that I had a detailed understanding of the data collected. I also transcribed and coded the data to determine themes. Table 2 in Chapter 4 provides an overview of the frequency of codes and the identified themes. The following sections discuss the empirical and theoretical results of the study.

**Theoretical Discussion**

The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) were the two theories used to understand the case study phenomena further. The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) is an approach to motivation and personality used to highlight the importance of humans’ personality development and self-regulation. The case study results support the SDT in that the participants recognized that students must be motivated to read to be successful readers. Additionally, participants shared
how conscientious they were about environmental factors that may affect their students’ ability to perform well in the classroom. However, there was minimal discussion about how lack of resources affects academic achievement. An aspect of the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) is psychological well-being and growth. If students do not have adequate resources within their homes, their ability to do well decreases.

Bergen et al. (2017) found that reading competency correlates with the home environment, the number of books in the home, and parents’ educational levels. Data indicate that African American students are entering preschool and kindergarten behind other races due to their lack of resources and SES (Camera, 2015). On a few different occasions, participants indicated that they noticed more of an achievement gap among students of different SES than among students from different racial groups. The SDT suggests that positive relationships and interactions are critical factors in helping students build personal growth. Furthermore, the SDT indicates that building independent readers requires teachers to help students personalize their learning. For low-SES African American students to be successful, teachers must see this as a separate issue instead of placing students into categories that only align with the teacher’s mindset and frame of thinking.

The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) is a social-psychological theory that focuses on decision-making behaviors (Zhang, 2018). The study supported the theory that human behaviors relate to objective circumstances rather than circumstances that the individual controls. Black communities are continuing to strive for equality; however, the limited resources and advantages within the Black community puts Black students at risk, thus decreasing their chances of advancing at the same rate as their White counterparts (Anderson, 2016). Children cannot control the circumstances that they are in; however, teachers can control how information is presented in
the classroom. Teacher participants did indicate that they provide opportunities for their students to make choices and be actively involved in learning. This instructional strategy relates to the basic need for autonomy, a need highlighted in the SDT. The teacher participants also indicated that they do believe in the power of positive student–teacher relationships. A positive attitude in the classroom helps increase a student’s reading motivation (Simeral & Hall, 2015).

Miesen (2003) studied the relationships between a child’s reading behavior and their belief system. The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that a person’s attitude and perception can determine if an outcome is negative or positive. The study results indicated that teachers realize the importance of being culturally responsive; however, there were very few examples of specific reoccurring steps teachers took to ensure they provided an ongoing culturally responsive classroom environment. African American students who are a part of these environments may not feel a sense of belonging if their teachers do not understand their low-SES African American students’ cultural aspects and interests.

**Empirical Discussion**

The data collected from this study were analyzed to determine if the results were consistent with the results gathered from the literature review. The synthesis of literature focused on reading motivation, low-SES students, and African American students. Teachers must be culturally responsive to their low-SES African American students’ needs to understand the most effective motivational strategies (Bowman et al., 2018). A great deal of developmentally appropriate instructional and motivational practices have been researched and found to be effective when teaching low-SES students and African American students.

The findings of this case study indicated that teachers do realize that reading motivation is a key factor in reading success. The participants discussed isolated instructional and
motivational strategies that they used in their classrooms. Research suggests that incorporating cultural representation within the school will help close the achievement gap and opportunity gap for students (Anderson, 2016). All of the cultural lessons that teachers mentioned as being integrated were only taught during Black History Month.

In reviewing the collected documentation, it was evident that teachers have a very predictable pattern when they write their lesson plans. Although teacher participants expressed that they provide their students with opportunities to make choices and share their opinions, the lesson plans indicated the opposite. The lesson plans showed a very systematic approach to teaching that focused on direct instruction; there was no indication of lessons or activities that fostered student conversations or discussions. Deci and Ryan (1980) believed that students are more motivated to learn when their choices align with their experiences and help cultivate a sense of belonging. Participants were aware that establishing goals within their classroom does drive student motivation. The student participants also indicated that verbal praise and prizes help increase their motivational levels to do well. The study results suggest that teachers do find ways to embed extrinsic motivation into the classroom.

All of the teacher participants were knowledgeable about working with low-SES students. The findings of this case study indicated that teachers recognized that their low-SES families have different experiences than high-SES families, and teacher participants were mindful of their students’ biological and psychological needs. Teacher participants discussed how supporting and building positive relationships was one of the first steps needed to establish trust between themselves and their students. Parkay et al. (2014) believed that students’ developmental level aligns closely with the child’s biological and psychological needs, and it was apparent that the teacher participants understood this concept.
Hilton and McCleary (2019) suggested that teachers who have fixed mindsets about students living in poverty make it more difficult for their low-SES students to succeed. The study results indicated that the teachers did not necessarily have preconceived notations about their low-SES students; instead, participants had the necessary background information needed to approach and work with these students. Two of the participants discussed how they pay particular attention to their classroom environments to ensure that their students feel they are a part of a warm and welcoming classroom.

Effective instructional strategies can be easily identified regardless of the types of students that teachers are working with (Cole, 2008); however, the concept of effective instructional strategies does depend upon the students that are in the school. The literature suggests that teachers should use an innovative approach to teaching phonic and phonemic awareness to students from minority groups (Van Rijk et al., 2018). The student participants discussed how some years in school were better than others, which may be due to the style of teaching that occurred. The students who liked their teachers indicated that a positive relationship was established. The students who did not like their teacher indicated that they did not get along with their teacher. There was never any indication that students did not have a good school year due to the subject being taught. The study results indicate that regardless of race, teachers use the same approach when teaching reading to White and Black students. Some of the participants stated that they taught all of their students the same regardless of race. However, as African American students get older, reading proficiency decreases, indicating a great need to properly understand how to teach African American students how to read.

Cultural barriers continue to play a factor in the education of African American students. The study results indicated this to be true. The teachers suggested that they do incorporate
culturally responsive lessons in their classroom; however, only one participant noted the need to educate herself more to better understand her African American students’ backgrounds and culture. Bean-Folkes and Ellison (2018) believed that school systems must cultivate an environment that represents and respects all students and their families. During the teacher interviews, one of the teachers indicated that she noticed racial undertones from another teacher; however, she did not indicate that this observation was reported to her supervisor. This revealed the divide in what teachers do and do not feel comfortable addressing.

Unintentional and unconscious bias continues to grow in education (Gershenson & Dee, 2017). Throughout the study, participants made comments about how some teachers responded to their students’ slang, style of dress, or social media comments. Teachers are responsible for ensuring equity and equality in the classroom; thus, these comments represent a significant problem. Teachers who create a culturally responsive environment are more aware of their students. Additionally, teachers can promote and encourage healthy student–teacher relationships, which will increase student achievement levels.

Implications

This section of the case study outlines the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. The achievement gap in education for African American students in comparison to students of other races continues to widen. Because teachers are one of the main guiding forces behind helping students academically, it important that the motivational and instructional strategies implemented in the classroom are appropriate for all learners. The theoretical implications relate to the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991). The empirical implications section examines the relationships between factors that motivate low-SES
African American students. The practical implications highlight how school districts can use the study results to help teachers create culturally responsive classroom environments.

**Theoretical Implications**

The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) were the two theories that guided this study. The study results provide an overview of how school districts can use these two theories to educate teachers on appropriate practices that should be used within their classrooms. Deci and Ryan (1980) believed that behavior principles and intellectual consistencies account for behavioral occurrences. Educators must understand this concept to increase students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Students are more likely to have a sense of inherent motivation if they enjoy completing the task or find it interesting; however, if students do not see the task as inherently interesting, teachers will have to find extrinsic motivators to encourage students to complete the task.

Student growth and achievement rely heavily on building the students’ intrinsic motivation. For this to be achieved, educators must understand the concepts of competency, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 1980). Furthermore, teachers must design and structure their lessons with their students in mind. Students who are asked to complete uninteresting tasks will not be engaged, leading teachers to use extrinsic motivators. If teachers deliberately and intentionally structure their lessons to maximize student engagement, students’ will be more likely to complete the task because they want to. Educators must transition from an impersonal approach to student learning to a more personalized approach that taps into intrinsic motivation. This approach ensures that students complete the task because they realize it is essential to their self-worth and goals.
The TPB focuses on an individual’s attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral controls (Ajzen, 1991). People who have developed these three factors also develop intention to complete a task. Teachers and students’ attitudes towards a specific task is a key factor in ensuring that the behavior will be completed. For example, if students have a negative attitude about reading, the likelihood of them completing the reading task is minimal. Therefore, teachers must find opportunities to embed classroom activities where students will associate a positive attitude towards reading. Subjective norms refer to how other people perceive the requested behavior (Ajzen, 1991). If most students in a class are not engaged during their reading block, this increases the likelihood of other students developing a negative response to the lesson. However, if most students are engaged and actively involved during the reading block, this increases the chances of other students also finding the lesson valuable. The perceived behavioral controls focus on ensuring that individuals have the tools needed to complete the task (Ajzen, 1991). Students who do not feel like they are smart enough to complete the reading task will be more apprehensive about engaging in the learning activities; thus, teachers must make sure that their students have adequate resources and tools to complete the task. Examples of resources and tools include anchor charts, reading notebooks, alphabet charts, and any additional items that support reading growth and development.

**Empirical Implications**

This study’s empirical implications are significant due to the achievement gap between African American students and students of other races. An important foundation of academic achievement is ensuring that students are proficient readers. Van Rijk et al. (2018) found that as African American students get older, their reading proficiency decreases. In addition, students who are African American and low-SES are less likely to become successful readers. As a result,
this indicates a need to understand how to teach low-SES African American students how to read.

Garcia (2017) found that African American students are more likely to attend schools located within high-poverty areas. School systems located in higher poverty areas receive outside funding and resources to better support students from low-SES backgrounds. Although additional support staff are often placed in schools through Title I funding, the results of this study found no indication of countywide initiatives that emphasized professional development opportunities for teachers who work with African American students. Additionally, teachers’ perceptions of what it means to be culturally responsive varied based on the teacher’s personal experiences. El-Mekki (2017) found that teachers working with African American students must be knowledgeable about Black culture and maintain humility. Deci and Ryan (1980) discussed the effects that positive relationships have on others. The study results indicated that teachers recognized how impactful it is to have a positive relationship with their students and their families.

**Practical Implications**

This study’s practical implications focus on how school systems and educators can contribute to ensuring that low-SES African American students’ needs are met. The concept of motivation is not new to teachers; every day, teachers are using a form of motivation to encourage their students. Implementing practical engagement activities and motivational strategies is essential to reading development (Ciampa, 2016). Teachers must be intentional with the engagement and motivational strategies that they implement within their classrooms. Moreover, although teachers may think their strategies are effective, their strategies may only be effective for a small percentage of students. Bowman et al. (2018) found that culturally
responsive teachers have a greater chance of increasing African American students’ motivation; thus, school administrators must spend additional time training teachers on the importance of a culturally responsive education.

African American students who come from low-SES backgrounds are often viewed differently by their teachers. Arditi (2014) found that teachers will lower their expectations for African American students from high-poverty backgrounds, yet higher teacher expectations are one of the predictive factors of students reaching their maximum potential. School districts must provide adequate training for teachers so that teachers understand how unintentional bias can negatively affect student learning. This type of training is one way to ensure that achievement gaps in learning are not based on teacher error.

Educators must closely examine the curriculum used in their classrooms. Traditionally, standards-based education has been used to determine how well students are doing in comparison to their peers; however, standards-based education does create a bias in education. Standards-based education is designed for students from higher social classes, so this type of education only increases educational disparities (Parkay et al., 2014). Some scholars believe that standards-based education is used to keep underrepresented students from performing well. Schools would benefit from hiring a more diversified team to analyze the scope and sequence of curriculum being implemented in classrooms.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Creswell and Poth (2018) found that delimitations define a study’s scope and set the boundaries of a study. I purposely selected southern West Virginia as the region for this study and wanted to include schools located in the same geographical region. Because most teachers in the area are White, it was essential to understand their perceptions of working with low-SES
African American students. Early intervention is a factor in ensuring student success; therefore, I needed to select teacher participants who worked at the elementary level.

The study limitations focus on the study’s weaknesses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study had several limitations. The first limitation was that this study was conducted in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the school schedules’ inconsistencies and a fundamental change to the school year, it was not easy to secure participants who felt comfortable and had enough time to participate in the study. Another limitation was that many of the participants taught in the same building and knew each other. During the individual interviews, some participants shared more details about their perceptions of working with low-SES African American students. However, some teachers hesitated to share their thoughts and opinions in front of their peers during the focus group. Another limitation to this study included the age of the student participants. I did not account for how difficult it would be to get students to open up to me without knowing or trusting what I was doing. I could tell that many of the student participants were conscientious about their interview responses because they did not want to say anything that they thought could get them in trouble. It may have been more appropriate to conduct this research with students who were in high school or college. Additionally, I believe the racial climate within our country also affected the participants’ answers. When I asked certain questions, I could tell how participants’ felt about certain topics based on their responses and body language. It was clear that some of the participants believed that the racial climate was a topic that needed to be addressed, and others felt differently. One of the last limitations included the fact that I was an African American principal within the county. I do not know if participants truly felt comfortable sharing their perceptions about working with African
American students with me or if they would have answered differently if someone else was conducting the research.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This case study focused on what teachers can do to create a culturally responsive reading environment in their classroom to support their low-SES African American students. The data collected from the documentation, interviews, and focus group provided information that could be useful for future research. Instead of using students between second and sixth grade, the study could be replicated with student participants in high school or college. Additionally, it would be interesting to replicate this study and use African American teachers instead of Caucasian teachers.

Several other research topics could stem from this case study. For example, instead of focusing on the perceptions that teachers have about what motivates low-SES African American students to read, an additional research project that focuses on teachers’ perceptions of being culturally responsive would be beneficial. Such a research project may help provide a deeper understanding of what factors make classrooms culturally responsive.

Camera (2015) stated that “on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 18% of African American fourth-graders were proficient in reading” (p. 2). In 8th grade, only 16% of African American students were proficient in reading (Camera, 2015). Because reading proficiency decreases over time, it would be interesting to analyze the assessments there are used to see if they are culturally competent assessments. Parkay et al. (2014) believed that certain assessments favor students from more advantaged backgrounds; thus, assessment results may differ if the assessments used by school districts were more culturally diverse.
Each year in West Virginia, teachers in third through twelfth grade are required to administer the summative assessment. This research study could be taken a step further by using a mixed-methods approach and using the results from the state assessments and the data collected from the interviews, focus group, and documentation. A mixed-methods approach may provide a more in-depth understanding of the research topic. Additionally, it is important to understand parents’ voice in the education of their child. As the student interviews were scheduled, many of the parents were intrigued by this research study. Parents discussed and shared their viewpoints of what a culturally responsive classroom looked like to them. It was evident that many of them had concerns about the school system’s lack of cultural diversity; however, they were unsure how to address this topic with teachers.

Summary

The achievement gap between African American students and students of other races will only begin to narrow once schools recognize the need for change. This case study explored Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-SES African American students in the southern region of West Virginia to read. The data collected from this study came from teacher documentation, interviews, and a focus group. Six themes emerged from the coded data: (a) curriculum and teaching, (b) culture, (c) stereotypes, (d) supportive teaching, (e) support systems, and (f) influences. This chapter discussed the summary of findings and the theoretical and empirical findings. This chapter also detailed the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications along with the study’s delimitations and limitations. Additionally, recommendations for future research were also discussed.

Teachers must be knowledgeable, innovative, and culturally responsive to effectively motivate low-SES African American students to read. Teachers understand the importance of
building relationships and providing explicit instruction; however, teachers still struggle to develop classroom environments inclusive to students of all cultures and backgrounds. There continues to be a suggested norm to teaching. Although this norm may work for some students, it does not work for all students. Low-SES African American students have been placed into two separate categories: low-SES or African American; these students are never identified as one entity. A systematic approach is needed to ensure that these students are not being left behind in the classroom.
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https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12184


APPENDIX A: TEACHER INVITATION

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter! I am excited to share my research project with you. I am currently enrolled in the Ed.D. program at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA. The purpose of this case study will be to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-socioeconomic African American students to read within the southern region of West Virginia. You are receiving this letter because you are eligible to help me as a participant for this study.

If you would like to be a research participant, I am requesting your written consent to participate. Approximately 25 teachers will be asked to submit the requested documentation (lesson plans, anecdotal notes, student progress reports, and weekly newsletters), and then 8 teachers from will be selected to be a part of the interview and focus group process. It should take no longer than 30 minutes for the individual interviews and no longer than an hour for the focus group.

Your name will be requested as part of your participation, but your identity will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. The has granted permission for this study. Neither the school nor the individual participants will incur any costs.

Your participation in the study will be greatly appreciated. If you would like to participate, please contact me at the phone number or email address included below.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign and return the consent form to me by email prior to your interview or by hand at the time of your interview.

As an added bonus, the participants selected to be a part of the interview and focus group process will receive a $10.00 Starbucks gift card.

I am looking forward to working with you on ways to help improve the educational system for all! Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require additional information.

Sincerely,

Brittany Anderson
Liberty University Ed. D. Student
APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

August 27, 2020

Brittany Keys
Angela Ford

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY19-20-283 CAUCASIAN TEACHERS’ AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS THAT MOTIVATE LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS TO READ

Dear Brittany Keys, Angela Ford:

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: August 27, 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,

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office
Re: Research Permission Request

Tue 6/9/2020 7:58 AM
To: Brittany Anderson

Your materials look good. You have covered all the bases, good luck with your research.

Sent from my iPhone

On Jun 8, 2020, at 8:30 PM, Brittany Anderson wrote:

Hello,

I hope this email finds you well! Today I successfully defended my research proposal, which means I am now on to data collection. Before I can officially submit my documents to the International Review Board, I do have to seek permission from your first!

I have attached my permission request as well as the consent forms that will be distributed to the teachers and students who volunteer to be participants.

If you need any additional information, do not hesitate to reach out! Thank you so much!

Have a great day!

Brittany Keys Anderson, Ed. S. Principal

<SuperintendentPermissionRequest.docx>
<Child Assent Form.docx>
<Parent_Child Consent Form.docx>
<Teacher Consent Form.docx>
Dear Parent/Guardian,

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter! I am excited to share my research project with you. I am currently enrolled in the Ed.D. program at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA. The purpose of this case study will be to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-socioeconomic African American students to read within the southern region of West Virginia. You are receiving this letter because your son or daughter is eligible to help me as a participant for this study.

The students who participate in this study must fall between the second- to sixth-grade range. If you agree to allow your child to participate, I am requesting your written consent. Approximately 8 students from [Bluefield Intermediate and Bluefield Middle] will be selected to be a part of the study, which will involve an interview and a focus group. It should take no longer than 30 minutes for the individual interviews and no longer than an hour for the focus group.

Your child’s name will be requested as part of his or her participation, but his or her identity will be kept confidential. The [Mercer County Board of Education] has granted permission for this study. Neither the school nor the individual participants will incur any costs.

Your child’s participation in the study will be greatly appreciated. If you agree to allow your child to participate, please contact me at the phone number or email address included below.

A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to allow your child to participate, you will need to sign and return the form. Your child may give the signed form to his/her teacher.

As an added bonus, the students selected to be a part of the interview and focus group process will receive a new book, box of crayons, and vocabulary and/or sight word reading cards.

I am looking forward to working with you on ways to help improve the educational system for all! Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require additional information.

Sincerely,

Brittany Anderson
Liberty University Ed. D. Student

bkeys2@liberty.edu
304-952-3645
APPENDIX E: PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

E1. PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Caucasian Teachers’ and African American Students’ Perceptions of Factors that Motivate Low-Socioeconomic African American Students to Read

This research study is being conducted by Brittany Keys Anderson a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University. Your child was selected as a possible participant based upon the following criteria: (a) must be in elementary school; (b) must attend school in the district that is being used for the research study; (c) must receive at least an hour and a half of reading instruction per day; (d) must be considered a low-socioeconomic African American student, (e) must read on a level equivalent to second grade or higher, and (f) must not have an individualized education plan (IEP).

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow him or her to be in the study.

Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this case study will be to explore Caucasian teachers’ and African American students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-socioeconomic African American students to read within the southern region of West Virginia.

What will my child/student be asked to do?
If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, he or she will be asked to do the following things:

1. Attend the introductory meeting where the purpose of the study and requirements will be discussed and reviewed. The introductory meeting will last no longer than 30 minutes.
2. Be available for a one-on-one interview. The interview will occur after school hours and last no longer than 1-hour. The interview will be recorded to ensure all information is recorded accurately.
3. Be available to participate in a student focus group. There will be other students present during the focus group. The focus group session will last no longer than an hour. The focus group will be recorded to ensure all information is recorded accurately.

What are the risks and benefits of this study?
Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Option 1: Direct Benefits All students who participate will get a new book, box of crayons, and vocabulary and/or sight word reading cards. The vocabulary/sight words will depend upon the student’s age. They receive these items as a token of appreciation for participating.

Will my child be compensated for participating?
Your child will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**How will my child’s 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. A full disclosure about the purpose of the study will be shared with all participants. To protect the identities of the schools used as well as the participants, pseudonyms will be assigned. The researcher will conduct interviews in a location that is private so that all participants are comfortable sharing information. All data that is collected will be safely secured on password protected devices. 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 will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. The researcher will be the only person who has access to these recordings. The researcher cannot assure that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group. At the conclusion of the study, all of the participants will be a part of the closing conversations and discussion of the findings.

**Conflicts of interest disclosure:** The researcher does have a professional authority of over the participants. She is a principal in the county.

**Option 1: Professional/Grading Authority** The researcher serves as a supervisor at Whitethorn Primary School. This school is considered a sister school to Memorial Primary School, and her students at Whitethorn feed into Bluefield Intermediate School. To limit potential conflicts, she will ensure that any research participants who do not feel comfortable participating will have the right to remove themselves from the research study at any time. She will assure all participants that the data collected will be confidential and not shared with their immediate supervisors.

**Is study participation voluntary?** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect his or her current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he or she is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**What should I or my child do if I decide to withdraw him or her or if he or she decides to withdraw from the study?**

**Option 1: Anonymous Survey Research** If your child chooses to withdraw from the study, they are to inform the researcher that they wish to discontinue prior to submitting their study materials. Your child’s responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

**Option 2: All Other Research** If your child chooses to withdraw from the study, he/she may let the researcher know at any time. As their parent/guardian, you can contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. If your child chooses to withdraw, data collected from him/her, 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 his/her contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Whom do I contact if my child or I have questions or problems?**
The researcher conducting this study is Brittany Keys Anderson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [________________________] or [bkeys2@liberty.edu]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty chair, Dr. Angela Ford, at [________________________] or [aford5@liberty.edu].

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

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

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

__________________________________________  _________________________
Signature of Parent                              Date

__________________________________________  _________________________
Signature of Investigator                        Date
E2. ASSENT OF CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

What is the name of the study and who is doing the study?
The name of this study is Caucasian Teachers’ and African American Students’ Perceptions of Factors that Motivate Low-Socioeconomic African American Students to Read. The person doing the study is Brittany Keys Anderson.

Why is Brittany Anderson doing this study?
I want to know what helps you want to read.

Why am I asking you to be in this study?
You were selected to help with this study because you:
   a) are in elementary or middle school
   b) attend school in the district that is being used for the research study
   c) receive at least an hour and a half of reading instruction per day
   d) are an African American student
   e) read on a grade level without additional support or assistance

If you agree, what will happen?
If you are in this study, you will do the following:
   1. Be available for a one-on-one interview. The interview will take place after school and last no longer than 1-hour. The interview will be recorded to ensure all information is recorded accurately.
   2. Be available to participate in a student focus group. There will be other students present during the focus group. The focus group session will last no longer than an hour. The focus group will be recorded to ensure all information is recorded accurately.

Do you have to be in this study?
No, you do not have to be in this study. If you want to be in this study, then tell the researcher. If you don’t want to, it’s OK to say no. The researcher will not be angry. You can say yes now and change your mind later. It’s up to you.

What if I have a question?
You can ask questions any time. You can ask now. You can ask later. You can talk to the researcher. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher to explain it to you again.

Signing your name below means that you want to be in the study.

____________________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Child

____________________________________________________________________________________
Date

Britany Keys Anderson

Dr. Angela Ford

Liberty University Institutional Review Board,
1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515
or email at irb@liberty.edu.
APPENDIX F: TEACHER CONSENT FORM

TEACHER CONSENT FORM
Caucasian Teachers’ and African American Students’ Perceptions of Factors that Motivate Low-Socioeconomic African American Students to Read

Brittany Keys Anderson
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study that explores teachers’ and students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-socioeconomic African American students to read within the southern region of West Virginia. You were selected as a possible participant based upon the following criteria: (a) must be a classroom teacher at an elementary school; (b) must work in the district that is being used for the research study; (c) must teach a component of reading; and (d) the teacher must work with low-socioeconomic African American students. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Brittany Keys Anderson, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to explore teachers’ and students’ perceptions of factors that motivate low-socioeconomic African American students to read within the southern region of West Virginia.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Provide copies of lesson plans, anecdotal notes, student progress reports, and weekly newsletters to the researcher before the interviews and focus groups. The documents can date back as far as 6 months.
2. Participate in a one-on-one interview. The interview will occur after school hours and last no longer than 1 hour. The interview will be recorded to ensure all information is recorded accurately.
3. Participate in a focus group. There will be other teachers present during the focus group. The focus group session will last no longer than an hour. The focus group will be recorded to ensure all information is recorded accurately.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: You should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in the study.

Compensation: Your acceptance to participate in the study will be greatly appreciated. The participants selected to be a part of the interview and focus group process will receive a $10.00 Starbucks gift card. You will receive this after the data is collected and shared with the participants.
Confidentiality: 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. To protect the identities of the schools used as well as the participants, pseudonyms will be assigned. The researcher will conduct interviews in a location that is private so that all participants are comfortable sharing information. All data that is collected will be safety secured on password protected devices. 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 will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. The researcher will be the only person who has access to these recordings. The researcher cannot assure that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group. At the conclusion of the study, all of the participants will be a part of the closing conversations and discussion of the findings.

Conflicts of interest disclosure: The researcher is not a supervisor of the teachers and/or students that will be participating in the study. She serves as the principal at Bluefield Primary School. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to allow your child to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on her or his decision to participate in this study.

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

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

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Brittany Keys Anderson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at bkeys2@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty chair, Dr. Angela Ford, at aford5@liberty.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

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

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.
The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (TEACHER)

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. How long have you been a teacher?

3. What is your favorite part about teaching?

4. What challenges do you face when teaching reading?

5. What is your experience teaching low-socioeconomic students to read?

6. What is your experience teaching African American students to read?

7. What is your experience teaching low-socioeconomic African American students to read?

8. What motivational strategies do you use in your classroom to motivate students to read?

9. What is your experience teaching motivational reading strategies to your students?

10. How do you determine which instructional reading strategies are effective for your students?

11. How do you perceive the achievement gap for African American students in comparison to other races?

12. What does the term culturally responsive mean to you?

13. What is your experience in cultivating an environment that is culturally responsive to low-socioeconomic African American students?

14. How do you know if a teacher is a culturally responsive teacher?
APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (STUDENT)

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What is your favorite part of school?
3. What are your experiences like with your teachers?
4. What does your teacher do that you like?
5. What is your favorite subject?
6. What are some reasons as to why you enjoy reading?
7. Describe the types of books that your teacher reads aloud in your classroom?
8. What does your teacher do to motivate you to read?
9. Why kinds of characters are in the books that your teacher reads aloud?
10. How do you determine if you are as smart as your classmates?
11. What types of stories do you share with your teacher or classmates about your life?
12. How do you know if your teacher values you?
APPENDIX I: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS (TEACHERS)

The focus group questions will stem from the information received from the requested documentation and the teacher interviews. The following are prompts that will be used to stimulate the conversation:

1. Discuss the importance of building student-teacher relationships.

2. What types of achievement gaps do you see in education?

3. What types of achievement gaps do you see between races in education?

4. What types of motivational strategies are most effective in teaching low-socioeconomic African American students?

5. What do you do to promote reading in your classroom?

6. How do you know if your students are motivated to read in your classroom?