

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS FORMERLY
ATTENDING URBAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

by

Sohn A. Butts

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 hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Self-determination theory, established by Ryan and Deci (1985), is the theoretical framework for this study, and was used to understand motivation in terms of basic psychological needs satisfaction and fulfillment, and how those motivations influence human behavior. The central research question was: What were the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools?

The three research sub-questions were: (1) what instructional experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement experiences, (2) what interpersonal experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement experiences, and (3) what environmental experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement experiences?

Qualitative questionnaires, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 12 participants selected using homogenous and snowball sampling. Data analysis was conducted using van Manes' approach (1990) of reflecting on significant participant statements, developing thematic meaning units, and constructing textual and structural written descriptions of student engagement, concluding with a written composite interpretation of the lived experiences of the participants. The essential themes identified in the study were Engagement Experiences, Instructional Considerations, Relationships, School-Related Experiences, and Non-School-Related Factors. Participants identified the satisfaction of psychological need as the cornerstone of student engagement and as essential factor in mitigating student disengagement.

Keywords: student engagement, motivation, cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, affective engagement, hermeneutics

Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to those deprived of the soft, warm, nurturing light of dawn, only to be scorched by the noonday's rays of marginalization and indifference. For those whose roots are parched, whose leaves waste away whilst still adjoined to limbs, and for those whose fruit never see fruition. For those who are cut low and tossed aside. Those who are trampled underfoot. This is for the mighty baobab seedlings yearning for the rains.

Acknowledgments

“We pretend to teach them; they pretend to learn and where’d they end up?”

Bunny Colvin — *The Wire*

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

Nelson Mandela

“Either they don’t know, don’t show, or don’t care about what’s going on in the hood.”

Doughboy — *Boyz in the Hood*

“They haven’t been given the opportunity to expand their thinking about what’s out there for them and they’re hungry for it. I know it!”

Erin Gruwell — *Freedom Writers*

“And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one to the least of these my brothers and sisters you were doing it to me!’”

Matthew 25:40 (NLT)

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Abstract | 3 |
| Dedication | 4 |
| Acknowledgments | 5 |
| Table of Contents | 6 |
| List of Tables | 11 |
| List of Abbreviations | 12 |
| CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION | 13 |
| Overview..... | 13 |
| Background | 14 |
| Historical Context | 14 |
| Social Context..... | 17 |
| Theoretical Context..... | 20 |
| Problem Statement | 22 |
| Purpose Statement..... | 23 |
| Significance of the Study | 24 |
| Empirical Significance..... | 24 |
| Theoretical Significance | 24 |
| Practical Significance..... | 25 |
| Research Questions | 25 |
| Central Research Question..... | 26 |
| Sub-Question One | 26 |
| Sub-Question Two | 26 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Sub-Question Three | 27 |
| Definitions..... | 28 |
| Summary..... | 28 |
| CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 30 |
| Overview..... | 30 |
| Self-Determination Theory | 31 |
| Sources of Motivation..... | 33 |
| Basic Psychological Needs | 36 |
| Conclusion | 38 |
| Related Literature..... | 39 |
| Student Engagement Domains | 41 |
| Student Engagement in Adolescence..... | 42 |
| Diminished Engagement and School Drop Out..... | 43 |
| Student Engagement and the Learning Environment | 45 |
| Student Engagement and the Role of the Educator | 47 |
| Relevance of Academic Content..... | 48 |
| Instructional Pedagogy and Student Engagement..... | 49 |
| African American Students and Student Engagement..... | 51 |
| Other Challenges to Student Engagement | 58 |
| Summary | 62 |
| CHAPTER THREE: METHODS | 64 |
| Overview..... | 64 |
| Research Design..... | 64 |

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Research Questions..... | 67 |
| Central Research Question..... | 67 |
| Sub-Question One..... | 67 |
| Sub-Question Two | 67 |
| Sub-Question Three | 67 |
| Setting and Participants..... | 68 |
| Setting | 68 |
| Participants..... | 69 |
| Research Positionality..... | 70 |
| Interpretive Framework | 70 |
| Philosophical Assumptions | 71 |
| Researcher’s Role | 73 |
| Procedures..... | 74 |
| Permissions | 74 |
| Recruitment Plan..... | 75 |
| Data Collection Plan | 77 |
| Questionnaires..... | 78 |
| Focus Groups | 81 |
| Semi-Structured Interviews | 86 |
| Data Synthesis..... | 90 |
| Trustworthiness..... | 93 |
| Credibility | 94 |
| Transferability..... | 94 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Dependability and Confirmability | 95 |
| Ethical Considerations | 95 |
| Summary | 96 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS | 97 |
| Overview | 97 |
| Participants..... | 97 |
| Faith | 99 |
| Jewel | 100 |
| Selah..... | 100 |
| Tonya | 101 |
| Ahmad..... | 102 |
| Bianca | 102 |
| Leslie..... | 103 |
| Denzel | 104 |
| Kendra..... | 105 |
| Maleek..... | 105 |
| Jaleel | 106 |
| Results..... | 107 |
| Engagement Experiences | 111 |
| Instructional Considerations | 115 |
| Relationships..... | 119 |
| School-Related Experiences | 122 |
| Non-School-Related Factors..... | 125 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Research Question Responses..... | 127 |
| Central Research Question..... | 128 |
| Sub-Question One..... | 130 |
| Sub-Question Two | 131 |
| Sub-Question Three | 133 |
| Summary | 134 |
| CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION..... | 136 |
| Overview..... | 136 |
| Discussion..... | 136 |
| Interpretation of Findings | 137 |
| Implications for Policy and Practice | 149 |
| Theoretical and Empirical Implications..... | 162 |
| Limitations and Delimitations..... | 170 |
| Recommendations for Future Research | 173 |
| Conclusion | 174 |
| REFERENCES | 176 |
| APPENDIX A..... | 202 |
| APPENDIX B | 204 |
| APPENDIX C | 205 |
| APPENDIX D..... | 206 |

List of Tables

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 1. Research Participants..... | 95 |
| Table 2. Essential Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes..... | 106 |
| Table 3. Engagement Experiences: Sub-Themes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes..... | 108 |
| Table 4. Instructional Considerations: Sub-Themes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes..... | 110 |
| Table 5. Relationships Matter: Sub-Themes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes..... | 112 |
| Table 6. School-Related Experiences: Sub-Themes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes..... | 113 |
| Table 7. Non-School-Related Factors: Sub-Themes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes..... | 115 |

List of Abbreviations

Advanced Placement (AP)

Atlantic Creek Public Schools (ACPS)

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

International Baccalaureate (IB)

Participant Data (PD)

Sub-Question One (SQ1)

Sub-Question Two (SQ2)

Sub-Question Three (SQ3)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Each year American public educational systems successfully educate millions of students and more than three million graduate from secondary education (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2020). Unfortunately, far too many students fall short of the ideal and fail to take strides towards academic progress and achievement (Appleton et al., 2008; McFarland et al., 2020; Sims, 2016). It is estimated that one in four students, or more than a million young Americans, drop out before graduation each year (Hickman et al., 2017; NCES, 2020). Although this dropout phenomenon is generally disheartening, it has further negative implications for African American students, many of whom are often marginalized by unfavorable socioeconomic conditions (Beckett et al., 2016; Finn, 1989; Konold et al., 2017; Marshall & Oliva, 2010). Orrock and Clark (2015) wrote that “the growing gap in achievement and drop-out rates between African American students and their majority Caucasian counterparts in America is alarming” (p. 1014). With nearly 25% of secondary school-aged students dropping out of school each academic year, it is critically important to understand the root engagement experiences (Hickman et al., 2017) of students, especially African American students.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This chapter first presents the historical, social, and theoretical background of the phenomenon of student engagement. In alignment with a qualitative line of inquiry, I disclosed my subjective experiences with student engagement from my experiences as an African American student, a parent, and a professional educator. In the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, I have positioned myself within the

context of the research study as the interpreter of the collected data (van Manen, 1990). This chapter outlines the nature and essence of the student engagement phenomenon and articulates the research purpose. The significance section addresses the contributions this study is situated to yield to the existing empirical, theoretical, and practical literature. Next, central and sub-research questions are rationalized. The first chapter concludes with critical terms and key points in the summary section.

Background

Over the past 80 years, the phenomenon of student engagement has been studied by many educational researchers. Despite having earned its place in current literature, a definitive construct has proven to be elusive as the concept has evolved and transformed over the years (Manigault, 2014). This section will present a history of the conceptual development of student engagement and will provide a discussion as to how the phenomenon of disengagement has impacted individuals and the larger society, as well as providing an overview of the theoretical frameworks that have been used to examine the phenomenon.

Historical Context

According to Kuh (2009), the empirical studies that led to the concept of student engagement have their roots in Ralph Tyler's 1930s work on 'time spent on task' during learning activities. Terms such as *vigilance* and *time-on-task* helped to conceptualize these establishing studies (Astin, 1999; Fredericks et al., 2011; Zepke, 2016). During the 1960s and 70s, Pace contributed to the conception of student engagement with his research on the 'quality of work'. Pace (1982) attributed learning and development to two concepts: frequency and effort. Where frequency addressed the amount of time spent engaging learning content, the effort concept aimed to assess the quality of work produced (Pace, 1982). In this way, these early concepts

addressed elements of both quantity and quality of work. Tyler's and Pace's concepts of engagement also take divergent paths in terms of the types of engagement being studied. Whereas Tyler focuses on scholarly behaviors, such as *staying on task*, Pace cultivates the emergence of student engagement by introducing a cognitive dimension in his conceptualization of *effort* (Kuh, 2009). Although these studies were significant in preparing the foundation of student engagement, it was not until the middle of the 1980s that the concept, as studied today, fully took form.

Natriello (1982) first defined the term *disengagement* as the degree to which students refrain from school-related activities and academic achievement. Later, disengagement would be further defined as a lack of participation in school-related activities and exhibiting inappropriate behaviors, up to and including school dropout and juvenile delinquency (Finn & Zimmerman, 2012). Without fully exhausting the concept, Natriello loosely defined *engagement* as participation (Natriello, 1982). Although Natriello defined both concepts, engagement and disengagement, his primary focus was on school dropouts (Mosher & Mac Gowan, 1985); thus, he channeled his studies through the lens of student disengagement. However, this rudimentary conceptualization of engagement marks the beginning of the current understanding of the phenomenon. Even in its infancy, engagement and disengagement were conceptualized as opposite ends of the same continuum (Degroote et al., 2019; Mosher & Mac Gowan, 1985). The notion that engagement and disengagement are not fixed, but are two extremes of the same phenomenon, is prevalent throughout the development of student engagement.

The concept of engagement was further crystallized by Astin's 1984 research on student involvement and Finn's 1989 taxonomy of engagement. Astin, like Tyler, Pace, and Natriello, proposed a direct relationship between the amount of effort, or energy, dedicated to school-

related activities, with the amount of development, achievement, and learning a student experiences (Rust et al., 2008). Astin's work was targeted at educational leaders and school administrators, as it focused on the pedagogical influence of student involvement. He also acknowledges the role of both physical effort and psychological, or cognitive, effort (Astin, 1999), thus dichotomizing the concept of engagement. Five years later Finn further expands student engagement. In 1989, Finn published a three-level taxonomy of engagement, which studied engagement in terms of school compliance and rule-following, taking initiative and showing an enthusiasm towards learning and school-related activities, and finally, social involvement and participation (Finn & Rock, 1997).

By the early 1990s, the phrase *student engagement* took form and could be found throughout the literature, although different conceptualizations continue to emerge. Newman (1992) researched the phenomenon of cognitive or psychological engagement in terms of academic work. Newman saw engagement as having a psychological investment threshold that extended towards task or skill mastery (Park, 2005). In his 1993 report, Finn uses *school engagement* to identify and describe a student's engagement in terms of participation in and identification with school-related activities (Finn, 1993). Researchers have conceptualized student engagement as the amount of time, effort, and cognitive investment extended towards learning tasks and other interactions associated with the learning experience (Yanik, 2018; Reeve, 2012; Olson & Peterson, 2015). Skinner and Belmont (1993) sought to investigate the relationship between teacher disposition and behavior on student engagement. Like Astin before him, Tinto (1993) recognizes the dichotomy of student engagement. However, instead of assessing student engagement in terms of physical and psychological support, Tinto emphasized the role of social interactions and psychological effort (Rust et al., 2008; Tinto, 2012).

As the concept of student engagement continued to develop, researchers began to study individual factors that contribute to the phenomenon. Finn and Rock (1997) assessed the influence of race and socioeconomic background on overall student engagement. Other researchers have examined student interactions with their physical learning space. Olson and Peterson (2015) concluded: “a student’s physical experience within their school is an aspect of engagement” (p. 2). Tough (2012) and Yanik (2018) concur that the physical learning environment is an integral determinant of overall student engagement. Still, other researchers have chosen to study student engagement through the lens of pedagogy and other classroom dynamics. For example, Sabin (2015) found a correlation between student engagement and the student and teacher ratio in secondary classes. Pedagogically, Carrabba and Farmer (2018) found that students reported feeling more engaged when working on project-based learning activities when compared to direct instruction. Wiggan and Watson (2016) reported that African American students especially preferred engaging pedagogical practices over more traditional ones. Still, other factors such as social engagement, family engagement in school, participation in athletic programs, and a host of other contexts have been studied to better understand what influences student engagement.

Social Context

Research supports the negative impacts on students, their families, and the larger community when student engagement is diminished or depleted (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012). Yanik (2018), Hancock and Zubrick (2015), Freeman and Simonsen (2015), and Lawton (1994) all reported that individuals whose student engagement diminishes to the point where they drop out will readily face a variety of life issues, including greater levels of criminal activity, economic hardship, drug and alcohol dependency, and both mental and physical health

complications, at greater rates than their graduated peers. The potential hardships introduced into an individual's life because of depleted student engagement often resonate generationally and throughout the larger community.

Studies show that when student engagement is completely diminished and students underachieve, or drop out of school, they are at greater risk of criminal behavior, incarceration, and recidivism than their peers who finish school (Hickman et al., 2017; Lawton, 1994). Approximately half of all incarcerated federal offenders (Brown, 2017) and over 75% of state prison inmates are high school dropouts (United States Sentencing Commission, 2016). Monrad (2007) found that over a lifetime, dropouts are imprisoned at a rate that is three times greater than individuals who have obtained education through high school graduation. Conversely, Pepler (2018) stated that students who engaged with school emotionally and behaviorally proved to be less delinquent than their disengaged peers. These statistics are even further exacerbated in contemporary African American communities, considering African American Millennials and post-Millennials, regardless of educational level obtained, are at greater risk of encountering the criminal justice system than young African Americans in any previous generation (Maxwell & Solomon, 2018).

Not all students who leave school because of diminished student engagement succumb to criminal behavior. However, most will suffer from job instability and economic hardship. Gonzalez et al. (2016) found that compared to high school graduates, dropouts tend to experience greater degrees of job instability. School dropouts, over the course of a lifetime, will earn \$260,000 less than those students who complete their secondary education (Monrad, 2007). High school dropouts, according to the national average, earn \$25,000 per year compared to \$46,000 for individuals who complete high school or its equivalent (Lansford et al., 2016). Viewed from

another perspective, Monrad (2007) reported that students who leave school early earn \$0.37 for every \$1.00 a high school graduate makes. Carnevale, Rose, and Che (2005) reported that the cost of not finishing high school is a loss in income on average of \$9,000 per year, although obtaining a high school diploma represents an increase of 33% per year in income.

Again, this is further compounded in the African American community. In 2016, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that African Americans with less than a high school diploma earned just over \$21,000 annually. The national poverty line, according to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (2019), is \$21,300 or less for a household of three—this is to say, an African American who does not possess a high school diploma enters adulthood teetering on the precipice of poverty. The economic hardships brought on by diminished student engagement often reverberate into successive generations of urban public-school students. Hancock and Zubrick (2015) reported that, when economic challenges and social disadvantages persist, disengagement is likely to increase in future generations. This economic disadvantage signals futures devoid of access and opportunities.

Brown (2017) found that employability, earning potential, and higher tax contributions are products of school completion. By contrast, high school dropouts are four times more likely to utilize some form of government or public assistance to maintain everyday needs (Lansford et al., 2016), creating additional costs to taxpayers. The American Public Health Association (2018) found:

if national high school dropout rates were cut in half, the country would save \$7.3 billion annually in Medicaid spending, \$12 billion in cost related to heart disease, \$11.9 billion associated with obesity, \$8.9 billion related to smoking, and \$6.4 billion associated with alcoholism. (p. 6)

Conversely, Monrad (2007) stated that, on average, school dropouts contribute significantly less federal and state income tax dollars than do their graduated peers.

Theoretical Context

Alexander Astin's theory of involvement emphasized "active participation of the student in the learning process" (Astin, 1999, p. 522). This theory has helped to shape the landscape of inquiry towards the direction of student engagement as it is widely known today. Astin's research focused on concepts such as motivation, psychological investment, and time and energy expended on learning tasks (Astin, 1999). Astin's seminal work identified five components of student involvement: physical and psychological investment, location along the continuum of involvement, the qualitative/quantitative duality of involvement, personal growth, and academic achievement. This work identified behaviors such as retention of academic content, extracurricular participation, and positive interactions with educators as being indicative of involvement (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005). Astin's work introduces the need to measure practices and policies according to their effectiveness to increase student involvement (Astin, 1999). Alexander Astin's theory of involvement was integral in the emergence of student engagement as it is studied today.

Finn's introduction of the participation-identification model in 1989 sought to address both the behavioral and emotional aspects of student involvement. Finn was interested in better understanding the social and relational attachments students experienced that led to active participation in learning and positive identification with school (Finn, 1989). His purpose was to understand the motivation behind what he called student 'withdrawal,' which often leads to dropping out of school. This model assessed student engagement in terms of the behavioral and affective contributions impacting academic achievement (Finn & Zimmerman, 2012). Finn and

Zimmerman (2012), as well as Selim (2014), posited that successful students participated in school-related activities at a higher rate than students who were less successful. Finn produced the participation-identification model to explain the positive impact that student participation has on successful school outcomes and how those successful outcomes foster a positive identification with school, ultimately leading back to greater school participation (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005). The participation-identification model introduces non-academic experiences that facilitate student involvement and engagement in school and learning.

Csikszentmihalyi introduced flow theory in 1990. In this theory, flow is defined as a state of deep absorption into an activity or experience that is intrinsically enjoyable and cognitively engaging (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Shernoff et al., 2003). This framework stems from the concepts of intrinsic motivation and introduces a cognitive component to empirical studies on student engagement (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Flow theory seeks to understand student engagement as it relates to autonomous interactions with learning, which occur when students are immersed in learning activities and distractions are reduced or eliminated (Whitson & Consoli, 2009). The three main tenets of flow theory are concentration, interest, and enjoyment, which when combined, lead to student agency and ownership of learning activities (Shernoff et al., 2003).

Achievement goal theory, introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s, sought to understand why students actively participate in learning. This motivation-based theory sought to probe and illuminate the influence of academic motivation on learning (Anderson & Patrick, 2012). Additional investigation revealed that motivation can be defined as the influences that direct behavior (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). The summation gathered from the literature is that motivation is a multidimensional, goal-centered process around task mastery or quality of

performance (Lee & Hannafin, 2016).

Self-determination theory is a theory of motivation used to examine student engagement. This theoretical framework hinges on the satisfaction of a students' basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence as they correlate to learning and the learning environment (Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Reeve, 2012). In terms of motivation, self-determination theory examines the energy and persistence directed towards an intended goal (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theoretical framework is associated with the concepts of intrinsic motivation, frustration, and resilience (Durkesen et al., 2017; Lee & Hannafin, 2016).

Problem Statement

The problem is the negative impact and consequences of diminished student engagement for African Americans attending urban public high schools (Bottiani et al., 2016; Cornell et al., 2016; Griffin et al., 2017; Konold et al., 2017; Verkuyten et al., 2019). Researchers have found student engagement to be a significant factor that impacts student motivation (Carrabba & Farmer, 2018) and serves as an indicator of academic success and student achievement (Guo, 2018). Likewise, diminished student engagement leads to academic failure, either in the form of underachievement or school withdrawal (Cornell et al., 2016; Geraci et al., 2017). Cornell et al. (2016) affirm "student academic outcomes are often linked to demographic factors such as family poverty and racial or ethnic background" (p. 2), which, unfortunately, is often true for many urban, African American students. Empirical data supporting the negative, life-long consequences of diminished student engagement are significant and real (Griffin et al., 2017; Sanders et al., 2010). Students who disengage or drop out of school earn less over the course of their lifetime than those who matriculate through high school graduation. Students who fail to complete high school are more susceptible to crime and delinquency (Geraci et al., 2017), are

more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol (Fredericks et al., 2019; Yanik, 2018), are less likely to acquire gainful employment, and are more likely to become supported by public assistance (Hickman et al., 2017). Research shows that by understanding the experiences that induce and support student engagement, school leaders and policymakers can work to improve student engagement and, consequently, student success (Olson & Peterson, 2015). Although researchers have investigated the impact of socioeconomics and race on the various dimensions of engagement, the voices and experiences of African American students from urban public high schools are scantily represented in the literature. This interpretive analysis of African Americans with recent urban, public-school student engagement experiences will illuminate the chasm known as the *achievement gap*, can work to reduce the alarming rate of school dropout, and provides insight into student perspectives of student engagement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Student engagement is defined as the learning effort of students through instructional activities offered to them, the students' reaction to and absorption of what is offered, and the environmental experiences there within. Student engagement is conceptualized through the lenses of behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and affective engagement. Self-determination theory is the theoretical framework used to interpret student engagement experiences in terms of psychological needs satisfaction and the domains of student engagement (Deci et al., 2017).

Significance of the Study

Student engagement has been examined in varying contexts and for a variety of reasons. This study examined student engagement from a vantage point which is underrepresented in the existing literature. This study contributes to the body of student engagement research by amplifying the voices of African Americans formerly attending urban, public schools and their experiences with school-related engagement.

Empirical Significance

This study contributes to the growing body of empirical work related to student engagement as it focuses on student reflections of their learning experiences. More specifically, it contributes to the body of work that speaks to the lived experiences of African Americans attending public schools in urban settings, a demographic that has been historically marginalized by public education. The voices of former students are sources of reflective experiences that supported or diminished their student engagement (Manigault, 2014). Louwrens and Hartnett (2015) explained that previous research has tended to focus on teacher or administrator perceptions, rather than student perceptions and experiences. However, “without authentic voices of people of color it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57). Accordingly, this study targets the input of those most knowledgeable of and most impacted by the phenomenon.

Theoretical Significance

Self-determination theory hinges upon the degree to which an individual’s autonomy, relatedness, and competence needs are satisfied as motivators of behaviors and actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci et al., 2017; Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Reeve, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Assessing the various dimensions of student engagement (behavioral engagement, cognitive

engagement, and affective engagement) via the lens of Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory's constructs of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) and intrinsic motivation (Durkesen et al., 2017) provides an opportunity for a richer understanding of both the theory and the phenomenon.

Practical Significance

This research study has the potential to inform urban communities, schools, and school districts, as well as educators and policymakers, of the symbiotic relationship of student engagement and intrinsic motivation. Schools that serve students who are at risk of low levels of student engagement due to challenging socioeconomic conditions and race-based marginalization (Beckett et al., 2016) must continue to seek effective ways to ensure that student engagement is cultivated. Additionally, research indicates that increased intrinsic motivation, and consequently student engagement, are predicting factors of high student achievement, school satisfaction, and high school graduation. Individuals who matriculate through high school are likely to experience fewer adverse life conditions than those who do not (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Olson and Peterson (2015) suggested that "to minimize student failure and dropout, it is crucial to assess student engagement" (p. 2). The findings of this research may serve to catalyze transformational innovation in urban public educational programming in such a way that student engagement, psychological-needs fulfillment, and intrinsic motivation are the pillars of a new educational paradigm.

Research Questions

The research problem focused on African American engagement experiences while attending urban public high schools. This research study was predicated on a central research question and three sub-questions.

Central Research Question

What were the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools?

According to researchers (Dary et al., 2016; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Sabin, 2015; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), student engagement is highly dependent on pedagogical practices, school-related interpersonal relationships, and classroom/school culture and the physical environment. For these reasons, the research will pose three sub-questions.

Sub-Question One

What instructional experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement experiences?

From a pedagogical perspective, the methods and strategies used to deliver content and instruction play a meaningful role in student engagement. Wiggan and Watson (2016) acknowledged that the traditional approaches to instruction are largely ‘hegemonized’ and may be prohibiting African American students from fully engaging in the teaching and learning process. Manigault (2014) believed “in order for students to achieve academic success, there must be a connection between student participation and learning” (p. 3). Carrabba and Farmer (2018) found that students showed increased motivation and engagement towards hands-on, project-based learning when compared to more traditional forms of direct instruction. More specifically, it has been reported that African American students desire more engaging forms of pedagogy (Sims, 2016; Wiggan & Watson, 2016).

Sub-Question Two

What interpersonal experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement experiences?

The student–teacher relational dynamics are important to understand when assessing student engagement. Teachers have been found to play a critical role in how students frame their ideas about school and learning (Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Saeed & Zyniger, 2012). As important as the relationship between teacher and student is, African American students “experience less supportive relationships with their teachers and less school connectedness relative to their White peers” (Bottiani et al., 2016, p. 1177). This intersection of student engagement and student–teacher interface is important as supportive relationships are related to improving student engagement and academic achievement (Cornell et al., 2016; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Yanik, 2018). In addition, the interpersonal experiences students have with their peers and family plays a role in student engagement (Geraci et al., 2017; Pascoe, 2016).

Sub-Question Three

What environmental experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement experiences?

Research studies on student engagement identify the role of the school and classroom environment as being significant (Carrabba & Farmer, 2018; Durkesen et al., 2017; Guo; 2018). Reeve (2012) reported that the learning environment serves to either support or thwart student engagement. This aspect takes into consideration the organization of the physical space or the actual condition of the school building itself. The environment can also speak to the culture and climate of the school and the role it plays in student engagement (Olson & Peterson, 2015). More specifically, Konold et al. (2017) found that “minority students experience a less supportive school environment that weakens their engagement in school” (p. 1290). Additionally, the communities in which students live and attend school contribute to the engagement experiences of students.

Definitions

1. *Affective engagement*—Positive feelings toward school, such as liking school and feeling proud to be identified with school (Cornell et al., 2016).
2. *Amotivation*—absence of motivation (Cannard et al., 2016).
3. *Autonomy*—a sense of control over one’s own behaviors, actions, and decisions is critical to achieving intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schenkenfelder et al., 2020).
4. *Behavioral engagement*—Compliance with school and classroom rules and involvement in academic and extracurricular activities (Olson & Peterson, 2015).
5. *Cognitive engagement*—Mental investment in learning, effortful strategy use, deep thinking, and commitment to academic work (Saeed & Zyniger, 2012).
6. *Competence*—an individual’s ability to accomplish or complete a task (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schenkenfelder et al., 2020).
7. *Intrinsic motivation*—the most autonomous form of motivation, directly associated with individual satisfaction and autonomy (Lee & Hannafin, 2016).
8. *Relatedness*—interpersonal connectivity with others and a sense of belonging (Fang et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).
9. *Student engagement*—Learning effort of students towards instructional activities and environment offered to them; the students’ reaction to what is offered and the absorption of it (Kurt & Tas, 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Summary

The problem is the negative impacts and consequences of diminished student engagement for African Americans attending urban public high schools. Understanding *how* and *why* students engage with school is essential to the creation of effective educational practices, policies, and

environments. This is true for all students, but especially for African American students attending urban public high schools, where academic underachievement and amotivation are persistent (Beckett et al., 2016; Fredericks et al., 2019; Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). Reeve (2012) affirms that student engagement is a precursor to learning itself and one simply does not happen without the other.

Both history and the literature affirm that not all students are engaging in school at the same levels. Studies have shown that a student's lack of engagement, or disengagement, is a significant predictor of amotivation and potential school dropout (Dary et al., 2016). Additionally, students who represent underserved populations are at a greater risk of disengaging and dropping out of school (Christle et al., 2005). African American students who attend urban public schools are especially vulnerable to amotivation, disengagement, and dropping out of school (Beckett et al., 2016). To halt this trend, Wiggan and Watson (2016) stressed that "schools must meet the relevancy needs of African American students, both culturally and cognitively" (p. 770). To that end, educators and education policymakers must understand what students require to induce and facilitate student engagement. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is, therefore, to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Chapter One introduced the historical, social, and theoretical background associated with student engagement. This chapter presents an in-depth review of existing literature on self-determination theory and student engagement. The concepts and constructs of self-determination theory are explored, as well as various sources of motivation. Intrinsic motivation is assessed and its relationship to the fulfillment of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is explored. The second section of this chapter synthesizes the literature related to students' experiences with student engagement. A discussion of the three dimensions of student engagement (behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and affective engagement) and an analysis of how each can be cultivated are conducted. School dropout, a factor of diminished student engagement and amotivation, and its consequences are also examined. The experiences of African American students with student engagement are explored in historical and contemporary contexts. The role of student engagement during adolescence is addressed before exploring the types of school-related experiences that support or thwart student engagement. The significance of the learning environment and the influence of educators are examined, as well as how the instructional practices used in classrooms influence student engagement. Lastly, non-academic-related factors impacting student engagement experiences, such as community influences, the role of socioeconomics, the family's predisposition towards education, and the role of school-related socialization, are addressed. Upon conclusion of the review of literature, a gap in the literature

will be identified.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory is a macro theory of motivation developed initially by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in 1985. As a theoretical framework, self-determination theory seeks to study human development and personality (Sander et al., 2010) and how that development leads to the liberation and enhancement of the human condition (Freire, 2000; Ryan & Niemiec, 2009). More specifically, self-determination theory examines human meanings, reactions, and cognitions to identify the causes, reasons, and sources of human motivation (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009). “Self-determination theory has a focus on what facilitates high-quality, sustainable motivation and what brings out volitional engagement” (Deci et al., 2017, p. 20). Self-determination theory has been used to assess a multitude of life experiences and cultural domains (Tjin A Tsoi et al., 2018). Self-determination theory is useful for studying motivation across various disciplines of study, including parenting, healthcare, education, and sports therapy, to name but a few (Deci et al., 2017; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2015). Self-determination theory, being both a constructive and a transformational interpretive framework, is of particular use because it “contribute[s] not only to formal knowledge of the causes of human behavior, but also to the design of social environments that optimize people’s development, performance, and well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). This theoretical framework has been used to examine the environmental conditions (i.e., social, biological, cultural) that support or diminish an individual’s innate proclivity to psychological development, experiential engagement, and overall wellness (Deci et al., 2017). Self-determination theory, as a theoretical framework, is broad in its scope and can facilitate an empirical inquiry with a wide range.

Since its inception, self-determination theory has addressed the intersectionality of performance and wellness with the construct of motivation (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009). Deci and Ryan (2000) define motivation as an individual's energy, direction, persistence, and equifinality toward a specific action or intent. McInerney (2019) considers motivation to be a construct used to describe the mechanisms by which people make choices. In 2019, Verkuyten et al. simplified motivation as any catalyst towards action. In other instances, researchers have found motivation plays a critical role in an individual's satisfaction (Tjin A Tsoi et al., 2018), the amount of energy expelled towards a task, and the level or quality of performance (Lee et al., 2016). Self-determination theory also seeks to examine the social and environmental contexts of motivation and, in turn, how that motivation is supported or diminished by those contextual factors.

Self-determination theory literature identifies both sources and types of motivation and their impacts on the quality, sustainability, and dynamic nature of human behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Researchers have examined what is referred to in the literature as the 'locus of causality,' or the sources of motivation in terms of the initiating and attributing impetus for specified behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Equally important to the origins of motivation are the regulatory factors which maintain behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Individuals have been found to experience increased and sustained motivation when basic psychological needs are met, and conversely, that motivation is diminished when these same basic psychological needs are not met or are thwarted (Cherry, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Motivation is nourished and sustained by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The literature presents four sources of motivation relevant to self-determination theory: controlled motivation, autonomous motivation, integrated motivation, and amotivation (Wijsman

et al., 2017; Willem et al., 2018). These four distinct sources of motivation have been used in self-determination theory to delineate an individual's relative position on the autonomy–control continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Durkesen et al. (2017) and Creghan and Adair-Creghan (2015) point out that by understanding the intersectionality of student motivation and student engagement, educators and policymakers can enhance pedagogy, policies, and practices to produce more favorable educational outcomes.

Sources of Motivation

The literature on motivation reveals several motivational types, four of which are pertinent to this research study. First, human behavior can be governed or influenced by forces external to the individual actor. This source of motivation, known as *controlled motivation*, stems from external or contextual influences (i.e., society, the environment, family, friends, etc.) or the desire to avoid negative outcomes or consequences (i.e., punishment, bad grades, loss of affection, etc.) (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wijsman et al., 2018). Motivation originating from external or controlled sources is typically less effective in influencing change longitudinally (Wijsman et al., 2018). Guo (2018) found that controlled motivation is “neither autonomous nor voluntary” (p. 255) and “does not appear conducive to students’ satisfaction” (p. 2) of basic needs. Rather, it is sustained out of a desire to avoid, or mitigate, undesired outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci et al. (2017) reported that controlled motivation does not lead to student achievement and instead “has been shown to predict greater behavioral problems and risk of disengagement or drop out” (p. 25). This source of motivation is often referred to in the literature as extrinsic motivation, as it is not driven by internal mechanisms as in the case of autonomous motivation.

Autonomous motivation occurs when an individual engages in an activity out of a sense of willingness, desire, choice, and volition (Deci et al., 2017; Willem et al., 2017). Carrabba and Farmer (2018) attribute autonomous motivation to what they refer to as ‘genuine curiosity’ that exists within the consciousness of all humans. Lee and Hannafin (2016) found, “when students make autonomous decisions, they assume greater responsibility for directing their learning, become more personally engaged, and deepen their understanding[s]” (p. 713). According to Wijsman et al. (2018), autonomous motivation has a direct relationship with desirable educational outcomes and can be germinated by two distinct sources: intrinsic motivations and identified/integrated motivations.

Intrinsic motivation is a particular type of autonomous motivation. Intrinsic motivation is derived from an individual’s self-pleasure or desire (Deci et al., 2017). Researchers identify intrinsic motivation as “the most autonomous form” of motivation (Gravel et al., 2016; Lee & Hannafin, 2016) and report that it is “directly associated with individual satisfaction and autonomy” (Lee & Hannafin, 2016, p. 712). Intrinsically motivated individuals behave positively and actively participate because they authentically want to. Lee and Hannafin (2016) identified goal setting, knowledge acquisition, skill and ability development, and positive behaviors as by-products of intrinsically motivated students. Researchers also believe that intrinsic motivation is nourished by the fulfillment of an individual’s need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness or connectedness (Guo, 2018; Kurt & Tas, 2018; Willem et al., 2017). Additionally, intrinsic motivation is not fixed nor permanent. Research has found that there is a “decline in intrinsic motivation over the course of childhood and adolescences” (Mahatmya et al., 2012, p. 56). Saeed and Zyniger (2012) found “intrinsically motivated students have higher achievement levels,

lower levels of anxiety and higher perceptions of competence and engagement in learning compared to students who are not intrinsically motivated” (p. 5).

The second source of autonomous control is *identified* or *integrated motivation*.

“Integrated regulation is the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation; the behavior is fully internalized and endorsed by the self, meaning that it is coherently and harmoniously integrated to other aspects of the self” (Gravel et al., 2016). Willem et al. (2017) attributed integrated motivation to the internalization of extrinsically motivating factors over time. When an individual internalizes the value of external motivating factors, assumes their worth, and subsequently engages authentically, it is demonstrated by what researchers refer to as integrated motivation (Deci et al., 2017). Integrated motivation adopts externally controlled motivating factors and coalesces them with internal values to produce a less than intrinsic, yet equally autonomous form of motivation.

Amotivation stands in contrast to both controlled and autonomous sources of motivation. Cannard et al. (2016) defined amotivation as the absence of motivation. In the case of amotivation, individuals are not regulated by internal or external forces towards targeted outcomes or goals and demonstrate diminished intent towards regulated behaviors (Gravel et al., 2016). Deci and Ryan (2000) identified amotivation as a by-product of low self-efficacy and lower levels of laden value attributed to the activity by the individual. It has been found that amotivation has a direct relationship with disengagement, as the former pre-empts the latter (Hyungshim et al., 2016). When studying amotivation in adolescents, Sander et al. (2010) found a lack of motivation is not always synonymous with disinterest but is often symptomatic of larger issues.

Basic Psychological Needs

A central tenet of self-determination theory, according to Ryan and Niemiec (2009), is “that people have a set of basic psychological needs that must be satisfied for them to remain active (or engaged) and for optimal development to occur” (p. 68). Researchers have identified the three basic psychological needs as autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017; Guo, 2018; Kurt & Tas, 2018; Sims, 2016). In 2000, Ryan and Deci pointed to the fulfillment of these three basic psychological needs as being necessary before motivation can be intrinsically induced in an individual. Conversely, amotivation is a result of these basic psychological needs going unsatisfied or unmet (Deci & Ryan, 2000). “When conditions resulting in unmet needs are persistent, they impede a child’s ability and motivation to function daily or attend and succeed in school” (American Public Health Association, 2018, p. 5). Deci et al. (2017) expressed the importance of understanding these basic needs in terms of their specific social and structural contexts, rather than from a universal perspective.

Autonomy, or a sense of control over one’s own behaviors, actions, and decisions, is critical to achieving intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schenkenfelder et al., 2020). Skinner and Pitzer (2012) found the ability to articulate one’s authentic self and to take congruent action as an essential component of obtaining autonomy. Fang and associates (2018) approached autonomy from the perspective of psychological self-direction and the need to actively enact one’s will and desires. Self-determination theory espouses that autonomy may vary in degree and amount and is key to motivation (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). In education, autonomy is indicative of choice in learning activities and in the demonstration of mastery or progress towards mastery (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fredericks et al., 2019; Sims, 2016). Conversely, extrinsically oriented and highly controlled strategies, such as rewards and threats, have been

found to thwart autonomous engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Unfortunately, it has also been found that minimal autonomous learning experiences are afforded to students who attend urban public high schools, as these schools are often oriented towards more control-centered and less autonomous educational models (Sims, 2016).

Researchers define competence as an individual's ability, or perceived ability, to accomplish or complete a task (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schenkenfelder et al., 2020). Fang et al. (2018) included the construct of skill mastery and the ability to effectively demonstrate that mastery as key constituents of competence. Skinner and Pitzer (2012) introduced the role of the social and physical environments in the manifestation of competence within domain-specific experiences and tasks. Deci and Ryan (2000) stated that "feelings of competence during an activity can enhance intrinsic motivation for that action" (p. 70). Competence, for students, is undergirded by their perceptions of their ability, structured learning environments, clear expectations, positive feedback, and personalized instruction (Dary et al., 2106; Sims, 2016).

Relatedness is a psychological need that must be satisfied to achieve optimal human development and support intrinsic motivation and student engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Deci and Ryan (2000) referred to this construct in terms of communal belonging. Relatedness is defined in the literature as interpersonal connectivity with others and a keen sense of belonging (Fang et al., 2018; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Fang and her associates also included the necessity of giving and receiving affection, within proper situational contexts, to their conceptualization of relatedness. Ryan and Deci (2000) underscored these sentiments and additionally emphasized the importance of internalizing those relationships. In education, the idea of relatedness extends beyond peer groups and encompasses all significant individuals within the domain or context of school and education (Fredericks et al., 2019; Schenkenfelder et al., 2020). In this way, school

administrators, counselors, coaches, and all school staff persons play a role in the students' experiences with school-relatedness. Most significantly, teachers have been found to play an integral role in supporting or thwarting the basic need of relatedness (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Likewise, the way an individual's family and/or community relate to school plays a role in students' relatedness to education (Bellibas, 2016; Fernandez-Suarez et al., 2016). Orrock and Clark (2015) found relatedness to be demonstrated through relationships with people, as well as through group or organization affiliation and participation. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), "school connectedness has been shown to have positive effects on academic achievement". Academic content has been found to play a role in a student's sense, or degree, of relatedness (Carrabba & Farmer, 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Orrock & Clark, 2015). Durkesen et al. (2017) concluded that relatedness is intrinsically motivated, however, it can be supported and nourished by the learning environment and its personnel, as well as the content being taught.

Conclusion

Motivation plays an integral role in self-determination theory. Deci et al. (2017) drew a distinction between the various sources of motivation and how these sources function in supporting or thwarting autonomous behaviors. Ryan and Niemiec (2009) highlighted the significance of examining the satisfaction of basic needs as the launching point for understanding autonomous forms of motivation. When an individual's basic psychological needs are met, engagement increases (Kurt & Tas, 2018), prompting an "inherent and proactive intrinsically motivated tendency to seek out novelty, pursue a challenge, exercise and extend [ones] capabilities, explore, and learn" (Reeve, 2012, p. 153). Conversely, researchers have found that when an individual's basic needs are frustrated, thwarted, or otherwise left unfulfilled,

autonomous forms of motivation and task engagement diminish, and personal growth, development, and wellness are negatively impacted (Hyungshim et al., 2016; Ryan & Niemiec, 2009).

Related Literature

Student engagement has been defined in a variety of ways throughout the literature. In 2011, Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris conceptualized student engagement as a meta-construct, integrating research-related topics such as motivation, involvement, belonging, and school climate (Appleton et al., 2008). Fredericks and associates found a significant “overlap in the definition across different types of engagement” (Fredericks et al., 2011, p. 8). Olson and Peterson (2015) viewed student engagement as student interest and enthusiasm for school. Beckett et al. (2016) identified student engagement as a “psychological process involving affective and behavioral participation in classroom activities” (p. 995). Kurt and Tas’ (2018) view of student engagement is similar, attributing student engagement to the effort students direct towards instructional activities presented to them. For Dary et al. (2016), student engagement is a product of investing oneself, one’s energy, and one’s commitment to both learning and the learning environment. From a social-emotional perspective, student engagement can be defined as a positive emotion directed towards school and school-related activities in tandem with positive interpersonal relationships (Yank, 2018). Reeve (2012), borrowing from Astin’s involvement theory, sees student engagement as a quantifiable construct to be assessed via time spent actively involved in a learning activity. With all the potential ways to access and define student engagement, Manigault (2014) conceded that “most people, including researchers, disagree on what constitutes student engagement” (p. 2).

Even with the ambiguity of meaning, student engagement is believed to be positively impacted by autonomous forms of motivation (Reeve, 2012); the satisfaction of an individual's basic psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness within a socio-cultural context; and academic achievement (Fredericks et al., 2019). Durkesen et al.'s (2017) research affirms the relationship between motivation and engagement and how those constructs impact a student's learning experiences. Student engagement has been found to have a vital role in predicting academic achievement and the quality of learning (Guo, 2018). The phenomenon of student engagement can be measured by many different matrixes or indicators, such as school attendance, assessment scores, matriculation rates, completion of assignments, school-related participation, and graduation or dropout rates (Sander et al., 2010).

What causes students to engage or disengage is a line of inquiry commonly found throughout the literature related to student engagement. Dary et al. (2016) discovered 47% of all students studied who dropped out of school did so because they were bored, amotivated, or otherwise lacked engagement. Conversely, Tomaszewski et al. (2016) suggested student engagement is evident in positive attitudes and experiences with school and school-related activities, and ultimately leads to desirable educational outcomes, higher levels of self-efficacy, and overall improved wellbeing. Researchers, educators, and policymakers are becoming increasingly aware of the significance of student engagement when addressing issues related to low academic achievement, the achievement gap across racial/ethnic groups, socio-economic status, and otherwise marginalized demographics, as well as for reducing amotivation and school dropout rates (Manigault, 2014; Kurt & Tas, 2018; Griffin et al., 2017; Yanik, 2018).

Student Engagement Domains

Current empirical research on student engagement often aligns to the three domains of engagement identified by Fredericks and associates (2011): behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and affective engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to compliance with rules, meeting school and class expectations, appropriate social interactions, and school participation (Mahatmya et al., 2012; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Olson & Peterson, 2015). It speaks to self-governance and the student's disposition in the context of the school setting. Cognitive engagement focuses on the student's intellectual and intrinsic investment in learning, as well as the role of effort in the learning experience (Geraci et al., 2017; Saeed & Zyniger, 2012). This component of student engagement is most closely related to knowledge acquisition and the mastery of academic concepts and skills. A student's feelings, be they positive or negative, in relation to their experiences with learning and their learning community are conceptualized as factors of affective engagement (Cornell et al., 2016; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015). These feelings can be evaluated in terms of student-teacher dynamics, peer-to-peer interactions, instructional strategies, academic content, the physical environment, or academic resources, to name but a few (Olson & Peterson, 2015; Saeed & Zyniger, 2012). Any emotional response to learning or the learning environment can be evaluated within the affective domain of student engagement. Fredericks et al.'s (2011) conceptualization of engagement as a meta-construct moved the phenomenon towards a more comprehensive approach to understanding student engagement and student achievement.

Student engagement is widely acknowledged as significant to the teaching and learning processes associated with formal education (Digamon & Cinches, 2017). Although educators, policymakers, and researchers agree that understanding student engagement is of critical

importance (Griffin et al., 2017), there still lacks consensus as to how it is best studied and analyzed (Manigault, 2014; Saeed & Zyniger, 2012). Researchers have analyzed numerous intersections of student engagement in the teaching and learning process. These intersections occur when or wherever students interface with teaching and learning, its environment, its processes, and its personnel (Fredericks et al., 2011). The intersectionality of student engagement and overall learning experiences can be studied in terms of their behavioral, cognitive, and affective impacts (Deci et al., 2017). It is the totality of these multifaceted engagement domains that comprise the student's position on the student engagement continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2017). A student reaches complete engagement when they demonstrate agentic engagement (Montenegro, 2017). Reeve (2012) defined agentic engagement as a student's "intentional, proactive, and constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive" (p. 161). In other words, when students achieve self-agency, they begin to take ownership of the educational process and become accountable for their own learning and understanding. Conversely, at the opposite end of the student engagement continuum is abject disengagement or amotivation, which often leads to students dropping out of school (Cornell et al., 2016; Montenegro, 2017). Regardless of how student engagement is conceptualized, researchers agree that student engagement needs to be better understood to meet students' needs and to foster academic achievement and autonomous motivation (Finn & Zimmerman, 2012; Yanik, 2018).

Student Engagement in Adolescence

Student engagement is not a variable that holds constant throughout a student's public education experiences (Fredericks et al., 2019). Student engagement has been discovered to increase and decrease in various stages of human development (Mahatmya et al., 2012). Geraci et al. (2017) found that student engagement tends to peak during the early educational years but

shows a significant decline as students reach adolescence. By the time the average student reaches secondary education, their motivation towards school engagement has all but flatlined (Cornell et al., 2016). “Low engagement has been recognized as one of the most immediate and persistent problems exhibited by students, particularly during middle and high school” (Griffin et al., 2017, p. 675). Adolescence is an especially poignant time because student engagement or disengagement during this developmental period can set a young person on a lifelong trajectory of achievement and success or failure and frustration (Tough, 2012). Additionally, adolescence is a time where young people are constantly cultivating their identity and their relationships to social structures such as education (American Public Health Association, 2018). One of the most significant causes of adolescent disengagement is boredom (Geraci et al., 2017). Pascoe (2016) and Sims (2016) found that students who exhibit interest, motivation, confidence, a collaborative spirit, and strong work ethics maintained higher degrees of student engagement. Guo (2018) found that, as young people develop, it is imperative that schools provide them with learning environments that are autonomous and supportive, that challenge students to think critically and solve real-world problems. Studying proximal factors such as the learning environment and teacher supports has also been found to have a positive influence on student engagement during adolescence (Fredericks et al., 2019; Quin et al., 2018).

Diminished Engagement and School Drop Out

Nationally, three million people between the ages of 16 and 24 have dropped out of school (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015). Dropping out is described as a culminating event, predicated by prolonged and numerous academic misfortunes (Degroote et al., 2019; Fernandez-Suarez et al., 2016; Orrock & Clark, 2015). Researchers place ‘dropping out’ and school abandonment at one extreme of the student engagement continuum, as it represents apathy and

amotivation towards school in general. Cornell et al. (2016) and Geraci et al. (2017) reported that, of high school dropouts and potential dropouts, most reported lack of engagement as their primary reason for leaving or considering leaving school. Another extenuating factor contributing to students leaving school prior to graduation is the student's socio-economic background and circumstances. Students who come from families living in poverty are twice as likely to drop out of school than students from middle- to high-income households (McFarland, 2018). Bellibas (2016) found a correlation in family educational level obtained, determining that children are more likely to drop out of school if their parent(s) dropped out of school.

The impact of dropping out of school has consequences that resonate beyond the walls of the schoolhouse. Researchers point to negative societal consequences associated with the phenomenon of dropping out of school, including undesirable economic, familial, and cultural conditions for those who drop out (Camper et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2018; Sakamoto et al., 2018). Studies show individuals who drop out of school are at a greater risk of criminal behavior, incarceration, and recidivism than those who do finish (Hickman et al., 2017; Lawton, 1994). Monrad (2007) and Sakamoto et al. (2018) found that, over a lifetime, dropouts are imprisoned at a rate three times greater than individuals who graduate from high school. Sander et al. (2010) found that one of the most salient school-related predictors of juvenile delinquency is student engagement.

Researchers found dropping out of school had negative consequences, including high unemployment, lower lifetime earnings, and younger mortality rates (Fernandez-Suarez, 2016; Itzhaki et al., 2018; McFarland et al., 2018; Sims, 2016). Gonzalez et al. (2016) identified several social, economic, and adverse health outcomes that can be attributed to dropping out of school. Yanik (2018) expressed that an individual who leaves school prior to graduating is likely to

experience a diminished quality of life, higher unemployment, illicit drug use, and increased exposure to the criminal justice system.

Gonzalez et al. (2016) found that, compared to high school graduates, dropouts tend to experience greater degrees of job instability and earn less. School dropouts, over the course of a lifetime, will earn \$260,000 less than those students who complete secondary education (Monrad, 2007). High school dropouts, according to the national average, earn \$25,000 per year compared to \$46,000 for individuals who complete high school or its equivalent (Lansford et al., 2016). Carnevale, Rose, and Che (2005) reported that the cost of not finishing high school is a loss in income on average of \$9,000 per year, although obtaining a high school diploma represents an increase of 33% per year in income.

Dary et al. (2016) found that increasing student engagement proved to be an effective means of preventing school dropout. Yanik (2018) concurs with Dary and his associates when proposing that student engagement studies be undertaken to understand and reduce school abandonment and dropout. Beckett et al. (2016) and Sakamoto et al. (2018) pointed out that this is especially true in low-income, minority communities, where historically, underachievement and school dropout have been disproportionately higher than in other demographic groups. According to Orrock and Clark (2015), in 2008 as many as 47% of African American male students dropped out of school.

Student Engagement and the Learning Environment

The literature indicates that the learning environment plays a substantial role in students' experiences with school-relatedness and students' level of engagement (Pascoe, 2016). The learning environment and its perceived conditions play an influential role in supporting or thwarting autonomous forms of motivation, which precedes student engagement (Fatou &

Kubiszewski, 2018; Reeve, 2012). Olson and Peterson (2015) reported: “students’ physical experience within their school is an aspect of engagement and represents a student’s connectedness to the external environment of the school or school climate” (p. 2). Orrock and Clark (2015) affirmed that a welcoming and supportive learning environment increases students’ feelings and perceptions of belonging and induces student engagement. Researchers increasingly identify school climate and classroom culture as elements significant to student engagement.

In 2015, Olson and Peterson reported “school climate is one avenue through which schools can influence student engagement” (p. 2). Kane et al. (2016) defined school climate as “individual experiences and feelings that students, teachers, and staff have about the school” (p. 1). School climate is closely related to affective engagement, or the “positive feelings toward school, such as liking school and feeling proud to be identified with school” (Cornell et al., 2016, p. 2). Fatou and Kubiszewski (2018) found school climate to encompass the concepts of values, resources, atmosphere, and network within their multidimensional construction of school climate. Cornell (2016) posits that school climate is a strong mitigating factor in reducing the developmental stressors that often occur during adolescence. Research states “school administrators, teachers, and other staff can have a profound influence on school climate through their interactions with students” (Cornell, 2016, p. 14). Positive school climate has been found to play a significant role in predicting autonomous forms of motivation that lead to higher levels of student engagement (Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018).

The physical classroom is an environmental variable contributing to or thwarting student engagement (Wijsman et al., 2018). Durkesen et al. (2017) acknowledged that teachers “emphasized the influence of classroom organization on student engagement” (p. 172). On a broader level, Yanik (2018) attributed behavioral engagement to the physical school facilities,

arguing that some learning environments are more conducive to learning than others. Bellibas (2016) found that factors such as class size have a substantial impact on academic gains, especially for minority and socioeconomically challenged students.

Student Engagement and the Role of the Educator

Teachers, and the relationship between student and teacher, play a considerable role in student engagement (Digamon, & Cinches, 2017; Geraci et al., 2017; Leath et al., 2019; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Sims, 2016). Sims (2016) posited that educators are critical to the students' experiences with school and their level of academic achievement. Montenegro (2017) regards behavioral, emotional, and cognitive forms of engagement as teacher-established processes. Cornell et al. (2016) and Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver (2019) associated higher degrees of supportive teacher relationships with higher levels of student engagement. Sabin (2015) reported the significance of the teacher–student ratio to student engagement and the need to view classroom engagement in terms of dialogue between the teacher, the student, and the content. In 2017, Geraci and his research associates found that students whose teachers were more engaging attended school more often and were more likely to complete school. Unfortunately, the literature also reveals that African American students experience poorer relationships with their teachers than do their White peers (Fredericks et al., 2019; Konold et al., 2017; Kunjufu, 2002).

The literature points to efforts teachers can make to foster autonomous motivation and increased student engagement inside the classroom. Carrabba and Farmer (2018) suggested increasing student motivation in classrooms requires teachers to involve students in instruction, make content relevant, and nurture student autonomy. In 2009, Ryan and Niemiec found that the transmission of values and practices that influence a student's motives, values, and goals is a

critical function for teachers who hope to spawn and support student engagement. Educators can employ a variety of strategies to improve interpersonal relationships with students, such as utilizing subtle social and communication nuances (i.e., eye contact, standing near students), and being affable and authentic, as well as building genuine rapport with students (Durkesen et al., 2017). Most of all, teachers should work to provide students with “supportive environments in which students feel independently supported” (Guo, 2018, p. 259), fostering a stronger sense of relatedness and increasing affective engagement.

Fredericks et al. (2019) and Verkuyten et al. (2019) suggested negative teacher–student interactions work to thwart positive feelings of relatedness and self-esteem, subsequently diminishing student engagement and academic performance. Rivera (2019) goes further and attributes not only academic success but future earning potential to students’ exposure and access to highly qualified and effective teachers. Sims (2016) illuminated the notion that it is the students’ interpretation of the learning experiences and interactions with their teachers that determines the nature of the student–teacher relationship, and consequently their level of engagement or disengagement. Researchers concluded that teachers can support student engagement through their classroom environment, building meaningful relationships with students, maintaining thoughtful classroom organization and practicing engaging pedagogy (Digamon & Cinches, 2017; Geraci et al., 2017; Leath et al., 2019; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Sabin, 2015; Sims, 2016).

Relevance of Academic Content

The environment, or *where* learning is to take place, and the teachers, or the *who* instructing students, are not the only school-related experiences that contribute to the varying levels of student engagement. Researchers in the literature validate the role of the content in

promoting, nourishing, and supporting intrinsic motivation and student engagement (Kunjufu, 2002; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Orrock & Clark, 2015; Sims, 2016). Louwrens and Hartnett (2015) reported that when students perceive activities to be more interesting, they engage more readily with learning activities. Similarly, Sims (2016) found when the content was more relevant, challenging, and meaningful, students felt more engaged.

In America, and indeed around the world, access to quality education has represented economic opportunity and social advancement for those who obtain it. So much so that former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, acknowledged education as “the premise of progress, in every society, in every family.” However, when education (the means to progress) does not facilitate the prescribed end (actual progress), amotivation is likely to occur (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Motivation theorists Deci and Ryan (2000) emphasized that “the *why* of goal pursuits does indeed matter” (p. 243). Among high school students who consider dropping out, 42% reported that they failed to see the value or relevance of school (Geraci et al., 2017). However, students have been shown to demonstrate higher levels of engagement when content is relevant and interesting to them (Craft & Capraro, 2017; Dary et al., 2016). In short, education must make sense, socially and culturally. Unfortunately, the United States’ educational curriculum has remained essentially unchanged for decades, relying on less autonomous pedagogical practices which are more teacher-centered than not (Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019). The implication for students is often increased levels of student disengagement and school withdrawal.

Instructional Pedagogy and Student Engagement

The literature identifies pedagogical practices as being important to academic success (Digamon & Cinches, 2017; Orrock & Clark, 2015; Kunjufu, 2002). How the content is

delivered and how students demonstrate their learning play critical roles in how students engage. Sims (2016) noted that in addition to the academic content itself, the learning activities assigned and instructional delivery are pedagogical components that support or thwart student engagement. Pascoe (2016) and Sims (2016) agree that the delivery and presentation of course content is just as important as the content in positively influencing student engagement. Academic content delivered in small group settings has been found to increase student engagement (Sabin, 2015). Carrabba and Farmer (2018) found engagement increased when students were collaborating. “It can therefore be argued that when students interact with the course material and their peers their level of engagement contribute significantly to their academic success and conceptual understanding” (Pascoe, 2016, p. 1). For educators, the primary means of evaluating instructional delivery should be focused on student success and achievement (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015). To support engagement, teachers should provide students with opportunities to learn and demonstrate learning through differentiation strategies.

Project-based learning is an example of learner-centered educational pedagogy that has been shown to facilitate autonomous learning and promote student engagement across all domains (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). Carrabba and Farmer (2018) found “student engagement connected to project-based learning was significantly higher than engagement connected to direct instruction” (p. 170). In addition, these researchers reported that behavioral engagement increases when students are collaborating around a common learning activity (Same et al., 2018). Behavioral engagement increases during project-based learning due to students having opportunities to collaborate with peers and share ideas (Carrabba & Farmer, 2018). Dary et al. (2016) concluded that student-centered educational pedagogies, like project-based learning, have the tendency to coincide with more meaningful learning experiences.

Carrabba and Farmer (2018) determined students must be active participants in learning to authentically engage with the learning tasks. To achieve this, students should have agency and voice in both the content, and the context, of the academic subjects being studied (Dary et al., 2016; Fredericks et al., 2019). Additionally, students should be granted a degree of choice in how they demonstrate mastery. “When students make autonomous decisions, they assume greater responsibility for directing their learning, become more personally engaged, and deepen their understandings” (Lee & Hannafin, 2016, p. 713). Dary et al. (2016) emphasized that students prefer academic content that is connected to or aligned with practical skills and ‘real-world’ opportunities. Student-centered, relevant instruction serves to support, and potentially satisfy, a student’s basic psychological need for autonomy. Manigault (2014), Creghan and Adair-Creghan (2015), and Fredericks et al. (2019) suggested employing challenging and relevant curriculum, in tandem with educational strategies that are meaningful to and authenticated by students, as means to effectively increase student engagement.

African American Students and Student Engagement

When analyzed through the lens of race, African American students display lower levels of student engagement across all domains of student engagement (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). From a behavioral engagement perspective, minority students are disproportionately represented in school arrests, suspensions, expulsions, and office referrals (Desai & Abeita, 2017; Marshall, 2010). Cognitively, African American students are exposed to content that is culturally irrelevant (Freire, 2000; Kunjufu, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sims, 2016), using pedagogical practices that are unsuited to them (Wiggin & Watson, 2016). All while the achievement gaps between African American students and their White counterparts widens (Orrock & Clark, 2015; Same et al., 2018). African American students’ affective engagement is often undermined by

less-than-supportive teacher–student relationships (Bottiani et al., 2016; Konold et al., 2017; Kunjufu, 2002) and marginal family involvement (Bellibas, 2016; Fernandez-Suarez et al., 2016), as well as community challenges such as generational poverty and violence (Camper et al., 2019; Creggan & Adair-Creggan, 2015; McFarland, 2018). The literature contained both historical and contemporary student engagement experiences of African Americans.

African American Student Engagement in a Historical Context

For enslaved Africans, and their African American descendants, obtaining quality education has been challenging, to say the least. During the institution of American slavery, enslaved Africans were prohibited by White enslavers from acquiring formal education. Enslaved Africans could be punished, up to and including being put to death, for learning to read and write (Christian, 1999). This denial of education to enslaved Africans was de facto law in the form of ‘black codes,’ which prohibited enslaved Africans’ movements, communications, and relationships, as well as their ability to obtain education (Bradley, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sims, 2016). In his 1901 autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, Booker T. Washington spoke of his desire to engage in formal education while enslaved on a Virginian plantation. He said he “had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in [the way White children did] would be about the same as getting into paradise” (p. 6). Washington’s statement serves to underscore the desire for and the perception of formal education for many enslaved Africans. The dominant White society resisted education for the enslaved Africans on the premise that education would inevitably lead to revolution, discontent, and dissatisfaction due to the inhumane and oppressive conditions in which the latter found themselves (Bradley, 2010; Freire, 2000; Sims, 2016). This ideology and thinking continued beyond slavery and into the Reconstruction period which followed.

The ratification of the 13th and 14th Constitutional Amendments, in 1865 and 1868 respectively, lawfully provided freedom and citizenship to emancipated Africans. These legislative acts, however, did not provide educational opportunities for the formerly enslaved. Many antebellum Whites, as well as some newly liberated Africans, questioned the necessity of formal education for the newly formed class of American helots (Sims, 2016). W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, pillars of progress for the formerly enslaved at the turn of the 20th century, frequently espoused their divergent opinions of the significance of formalized education, the former promoting academic excellence while the latter focused on vocational astuteness. Nonetheless, between the years of 1895 and 1932, this country saw African student enrollment in secondary and higher education increase from 1,000 students to over three million students nation-wide (Sims, 2016), thus emphasizing the desire of formerly enslaved Africans to engage in formal education.

The 1896 landmark U. S. Supreme Court ruling in the Plessey v. Ferguson case would lay out the educational trajectory for the descendants of the formerly enslaved Africans in America for the following five decades. In this case, the courts established the rule of ‘separate but equal,’ a racist policy and system of practices intended to further isolate and marginalize newly liberated Africans. This ruling created lawful segregation, and consequently institutional discrimination and systemic racist practices, which were soon after extended into public education (Caldas & Bankston, 2007). Thus, Plessey v. Ferguson essentially created dual educational systems: one for America’s White students and one for its Black students (Bradley, 2010). The concept of separate but equal was never actualized as schools for Black children were rarely, if ever, equitable in funding, resources, or facilities as schools for White children (Bradley, 2010; Caldas & Bankston, 2007; Sims, 2016).

Despite these inequities, over the next fifty years, African Americans increasingly pursued education under the rule of separate but equal, Jim Crow, racial segregation, marginalization, and isolation (Bradley, 2010). In 1954, the United States Courts reversed the separate but equal doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson in its ruling in the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka case. In this pivotal court case, the United States Supreme Court ruled that school segregation was indeed unconstitutional (Sims, 2016) and thus began the process of undoing the *de jure* discriminatory policies of lawful segregation. For the first time in America's history, all American children would have the lawful right to attend school with children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Although Brown v. Board annihilated the Plessy v. Ferguson separate but equal ruling, it failed to fulfill its goal of educational equity (Rothstein, 2014). *De facto* school segregation continued to place African American students at a disadvantage. Public education remained as segregated as the neighborhoods that housed the schools because structural racism continued to persist in this country (Rothstein, 2014). The policy of 'redlining,' as outlined by President F. D. Roosevelt's 1933 'New Deal,' introduced discriminatory housing practices which forced African Americans into urban centers and public housing by systemically denying African Americans mortgages to purchase homes outside of these communities (Gross, 2017). The result was the maintenance of the status quo social stratification and inequities in Black communities, and subsequently their schools, for the countless African Americans who were corralled there (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leath et al., 2019; Sims, 2016). Rothstein (2014) goes as far as to suggest that without residential integration, educational integration was simply never a potential reality.

African American Student Engagement in a Contemporary Context

Since the *Brown v. Board* ruling, and the ensuing Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the quality of public education for African American students remains in question. Orrock and Clark (2015) called the growing achievement gap between African American students and their White counterparts alarming. Bellibas (2016) illustrates this perspective when noting that what is commonly referred to as the ‘achievement gap’ is nothing more than a collection of minority students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Camper et al. (2019) found that simply being a minority increases the likelihood of school disengagement and dropout.

Whereas education was once considered to be the great social and economic ‘equalizer,’ American public schools today often work to perpetuate the economic and social disparities of this country (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sims, 2016). African American students “experience a less supportive school environment that weakens their engagement in school” (Konold et al., 2017, p. 1290). African American students, across all ages and grade levels, are disproportionately represented in school arrests, suspensions, expulsions, and office referrals (Desai & Abeita, 2017; Marshall, 2010). This disproportionality negatively impacts African American students’ behavioral engagement and often diminishes student engagement altogether. Peart (2018) concluded that African American students have more negative secondary school experiences than do their White peers, which can be attributed to several factors, as discussed below.

Educators. Leath et al. (2019) found “Black schools are less likely to be well resourced, including having high experienced teachers” (p. 1326). Bellibas’ (2016) research found that teacher quality influences student engagement more so than any other school-related factor. However, African American students reported having significantly poorer relationships with

their teachers than their White and Hispanic peers (Bottiani et al., 2016; Konold et al., 2017; Kunjufu, 2002). African American students are likely to encounter teachers who are culturally inept, have little to no experience with the cultures or communities of their students, and even report greater instances of maltreatment from such educators (Leath et al., 2019; Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019). Sims (2016) found that, due to limited training in multicultural issues, many teachers are not prepared to meet the challenges and issues of minority students who come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and communities. This, in turn, diminishes African American students' sense of relatedness, and consequently works to reduce the students' ability to self-determine and self-actualize in the learning environment.

Curriculum Relevance. The intersectionality of race and educational relevance for African Americans can be examined via the iconic 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folks*. In this seminal work, W. E. B. DuBois articulated the sentiments of early 20th century African Americans and their experiences with formal education when he wrote, “what need of education, since we must always cook and serve?” (p. 12). This rhetorical question brings to bear the ability of formal education to augment the racial and socioeconomic realities of African Americans who seek to pursue it. In his book *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (1963) Booker T. Washington, when speaking about African American progress after the Reconstruction period, is famously quoted as saying “the world cares little about what a [African American] man knows; it cares more about what a [African American] man is able to do.” Nearly 100 years later, Lawton (1994) echoed these sentiments when he reported that students are more likely to finish school when completion translates to opportunities, which are otherwise unobtainable without education. Louwrens and Hartnett (2015) attributed increased engagement across all three domains (behavior, cognitive, affective) to education that is designed to be relevant to students.

Curriculum Integrity. In addition to the relevance of education to employability and financial viability, African American students face yet a bigger issue. This issue is the absence of an Afrocentric curriculum and, conversely, the dogma of European exceptionalism. Together, these curriculum practices decrease student engagement and autonomous motivation for African American students. Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver (2019) found that excluding diverse and multicultural perspectives in favor of hegemonic narratives emphasizing the ethos of the culturally dominant group underserves all American students, not just minorities. This omission further perpetuates the systemic marginalization of African Americans by way of their experiences with public education. Verkuyten et al. (2019) reported that when ethnic or racial identity is compromised in students, their basic needs are thwarted and student engagement is negatively impacted. “When educators teach only from an ethnocentric monoculturalist point of view, or majority dominated-perspective, minorities are more apt to withdraw, experiences mistrust, and sense they do not belong due to not having their culture acknowledged” (Orrock & Clark, 2015, p. 1020). Conversely, Carrabba and Farmer (2018) found students display less apathy and show increased student engagement when they can make connections and associations between the lessons and their lives. Orrock and Clark (2015) stated that “when a culturally responsive curriculum is not created, possible lack of engagement and struggles with identity may occur within minority groups” (p. 1019), solidifying the notion that what African American students are taught can dictate both their experience with school and their levels of engagement.

Sims (2016) used achievement outcomes to admonish America’s public educational systems, which have increasingly failed to adequately educate African American students. Geraci et al. (2016) concluded that no one type of curricula approach, school/instructional model,

or pedagogy can successfully engage all types of students. For these reasons, and others, “schools must meet the relevancy needs of African American students, both culturally and cognitively” (Wiggan & Watson, 2016, p. 70) to increase African American student engagement (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leath et al., 2019).

Instructional Pedagogy. From a pedagogical perspective, Sims (2016) identified teacher-centered lessons, direct instruction, Eurocentric curriculum, lectures, and repetition as ineffective instructional strategies for reaching urban, African American students. Conversely, African American students specifically, and urban students in general, favored more engaging forms of pedagogy, as opposed to more traditional forms of instruction (Sims, 2016; Wiggan & Watson, 2016).

Other Challenges to Student Engagement

Research acknowledges the importance of factors such as school resources, curriculum choices, and the influence of teachers on student achievement (Tomaszewski, 2020). However, student engagement is not solely dependent on these experiences. Ryan and Deci (2000) asserted that a student’s school engagement is directly related to their psychological health and general life satisfaction. Zajacova and Lawrence (2018) and Cornell and his associates (2016) deduced from their research that, in America, depending on their race, where they live, and their family resources, students experience increasingly disproportioned educational opportunities. The American Public Health Association (2018) found that the poverty and community challenges faced by urban students make meeting their fundamental needs problematic. In addition to school-related experiences, African American, urban students must contend with issues such as race and racism, socioeconomic stratifications, and other adverse child experiences on their way to student engagement.

Community Influences on Student Engagement. The communities in which students live and learn have been found to be a significant predictor of student engagement (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Orrock & Clark, 2015). The state and condition of the community play an influential role in a student's ability to succeed academically (Camper et al., 2019). Tough (2012) found that students who live in violent and chaotic communities were being negatively impacted both physically and emotionally, thus diminishing their ability to initiate and maintain student engagement. Elsaesser et al. (2016) drew a connection between diminished student engagement and communities' issues, writing "adolescents living in communities with high rates of community violence are at risk for negative outcomes similar to those growing up in war zones, including low academic achievement, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress" (p. 394). Disproportionately to White students, African American students are subject to attending school in racially homogenous and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2013).

Students who live in and attend school in economically challenged communities and neighborhoods tend to have limited access to community resources that promote student engagement (Sakamoto et al., 2018). Manigault (2014) acknowledged the social cost of disengagement to students of marginalized communities. Rothstein (2014) went further in his assessment, drawing correlations between increased student achievement and community revitalization and diversification. Orrock and Clark (2015) described how the community can support student engagement. The researchers wrote, "having neighbors and community members who support at-risk African American males creates a sense of belonging, and the belief in self and that others care about the welfare of the student is vitally important" (p. 1033). Saeed and

Zyniger (2012) reported that student engagement is a critical factor in enhancing learning and academic achievement, particularly for students who hail from marginalized communities.

Socioeconomic Background. Low socioeconomic status and poverty have been implicated in the literature as having a negative impact on student engagement and academic outcomes (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Cornell et al., 2016; Konold et al., 2017). In terms of engagement, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds show diminished student engagement across all domains (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Students living in poverty drop out at twice the rate of students who do not live in poverty (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; McFarland, 2018). In comparison with students from high socioeconomic backgrounds, even high-performing students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to disengage from school (Bellibas, 2016). According to Tomaszewski et al. (2020), socioeconomically challenged students have performed worse academically than their more well-off peers. Fatou and Kubiszewski (2018) found in their study that students who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds tend to adapt less effectively to school norms and expectations, are likely to have more negative perceptions of school and education and are more likely to drop out than students who come from backgrounds of higher socio-economic status and means. On the other hand, students from challenging socio-economic backgrounds also tend to have less certified teachers, leaving them further underserved (Rivera, 2019; Same et al., 2018; Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019). Bellibas (2016) found that an adequate supply of well-qualified teachers can help to mitigate the issue of achievement for students from families with limited resources.

In 2010, Marshall and Oliva found that African Americans, who comprise roughly 13% of the nation's total population (U. S. Census Bureau, 2019), make up 25% of Americans living in poverty. African American students who live in impoverished conditions subsequently attend

school in subpar facilities. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) pointed to dilapidated communities and schools as cornerstones of institutional and structural racism plaguing African Americans. In the National Center for Education Statistics' 2014 report, urban, minority students who live in impoverished communities were more likely to attend a school in a building which is in poor condition than any other demographic of students. This is especially concerning considering the correlation between academic achievement and the condition of the school building (Maxwell, 2016). Although educators and schools may not directly be able to influence the socio-economic challenges facing their students, Cornell et al. (2016) found that "a supportive climate can buffer the negative impact of poverty on academic achievement" (p. 1). This supportive climate serves to support students' basic psychological need for relatedness and cultivates the intrinsic motivation that produces student engagement.

Family Educational Perception and Obtainment. In addition to community and socio-economic factors, family expectations and perceptions play a significant role in the degree to which students engage in school (Bellibas, 2016; Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Fernandez-Suarez et al., 2016; Kurt & Tas, 2018; Tough, 2012). The educational ambition of parents for their students, parental communication with the local school, parental involvement in school-related activities, and parental support have been found to support student engagement (Kurt & Tas, 2018). Conversely, students who reside in troubled and traumatic homes find it more difficult to engage in school (Tough, 2012). Bellibas (2016) found that the educational obtainment of African American mothers has a direct correlation to their children's experiences with student engagement. Fernandez-Suarez et al. (2016) and Same et al. (2018) reported that a leading predictive factor for diminished student engagement is a lack of school-related parental involvement and monitoring of academic progress.

Extracurricular/Social Participation. Some researchers have chosen to assess student engagement in terms of student participation in school-related experiences such as clubs, sports, and general socialization. Active participation in extracurricular and social activities is believed to support relatedness, as well as increase affective and behavioral engagement (Orrock & Clark, 2015; Same et al., 2018). “Much of the research presented on secondary education supports that students who are engaged in their high schools, particularly with regards to social interactions and peer/instructor relationships also leads to positive engagement factors and academic success” (Manigault, 2014, p. 2). Louwrens and Hartnett (2015) revealed in their study the correlation between positive peer-to-peer relationships and increased student engagement. In addition, Degroote et al. (2019) found that cognitive engagement is positively impacted when students attend class and learn with other students who actively demonstrate student engagement.

Summary

Student engagement has a positive correlation to academic success, content mastery and retention, and school completion (Manigault, 2014). Improved student engagement has been recognized to promote positive behaviors and protect against misbehavior, criminal activity, and school dropout (Elsaesser et al., 2016; Manigault, 2014; Olson & Peterson, 2015). The literature on student engagement underscores the importance of teacher supports, positive learning environments, socially and culturally relevant content and pedagogy, and positive interpersonal relationships with educators and peers, coupled with feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as positively associated with higher levels of student engagement (Geraci et al., 2017). Creggan and Adair-Creggan (2015) and Wiggan and Watson (2016) agree that school leaders and school districts should award deeper consideration to the educational needs of its socio-economically challenged and minority student populations.

Relatively few studies have investigated the impact on student engagement (Griffin et al., 2017) from the experiences of African American students attending urban public high schools. Much of the research that has occurred with this student demographic has focused on teacher and administrator perceptions and experiences, rather than those of students (Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015). Hancock and Zubrick (2015) and Olson and Peterson (2015) reported the general absence of studies amplifying students' experiences with motivation and the larger topic of student engagement.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Chapter One introduced the historical, social, and theoretical background associated with student engagement. This opening chapter provided a synopsis of the problem and the statement of purpose, before positioning this study in the context of existing literature. Chapter Two provided an in-depth review of existing literature of self-determination theory, the theoretical framework of this study, and the phenomenon of student engagement. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the methodology that was used in this research study. This chapter presents the design background, the research questions as presented in Chapter One, a discussion of the research setting and participants, research procedures, an account of my role in the study, data collection and analysis strategies, a disclosure of strategies to be used to increase trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

For this research project, a qualitative study was best suited. Qualitative studies seek to interpret the world and gather meaning from it in the context of those who have experienced a specified phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007). Fusch et al. (2018) espoused that the qualitative approach allows the researcher to describe or interpret phenomena to develop meaning. Qualitative research is inductive and is dependent upon a detailed reading of participants' experiences (Azungah, 2018; Mohajan, 2018; Suter, 2011; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). This research design moves from specific constructions of reality to generalizations, while allowing the inquiry to develop in an organic and natural way. A qualitative methodology

conjoins the assumptions and experiences of the researcher with the research study and its participants while maintaining an account of biases and preconceptions (Austin & Sutton, 2014). Conversely, it seeks to isolate and identify specific variables. These variables are hypothesized, evaluated, and assessed for the application of specificity (Brannen, 2017). Quantitative research does not allow for the contextually rich, descriptive, open-ended, collection of data which qualitative studies are designed to facilitate. A quantitative approach would constrain the participant narratives to general numerical results, stripping away the voices of participants who have lived experiences of the phenomenon. Lastly, as it is impossible for me to detach from the study, its participants, and its implications, I yield and reveal myself within the study (Moustakas, 1994)—a measure not afforded by a quantitative approach.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on student engagement by interpreting the engagement experiences of African Americans who attended urban public high schools. The ‘essence’ of student engagement experiences can more readily be extrapolated, and consequently understood, through the direct participant discourse afforded by a qualitative methodology. It is the participants’ descriptions of their student engagement experiences that will be interpreted for this study.

There are several qualitative designs from which a researcher may choose for a study of this type (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2014). The narrative approach allows for the collection of phenomenological data but does not seek to interpret common meaning in larger participant groups (Patton, 2015). Rather, the narrative approach focuses on one or two participants and the meanings they attach to the phenomenon being studied (Tomaszewski, 2020). Case studies, on the other hand, can examine a solitary case like a narrative, or can be expanded to study multiple cases (Creswell & Poth, 2014). These types of studies represent

bounded systems, or clearly defined specific cases (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). However, case studies do not seek to interpret common meaning among a group of participants who share a phenomenon. At best, case studies may make comparisons between cases, but are designed to be an in-depth description of the specified, or bound case. An ethnographic approach seeks to describe value and meaning at the cultural level and requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the group or culture being studied (Patton, 2015; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). This approach is most widely associated with anthropology (Suter, 2011). A phenomenological approach describes or interprets the lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings of multiple participants who have shared a defined phenomenon (Austin & Sutton, 2014).

Heidegger et al. (1962) defined *phenomenon* as that which shows itself in and through itself. For Husserl (1982), phenomenology is centered upon a particular 'life world' and the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. Phenomenology allows researchers to describe or interpret the meaning of these lived experiences (phenomenon) by those persons who have had such experiences (Mohajan, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology is a common qualitative research approach because of its comprehensive participant descriptions, researcher interpretations, and reflexivity, which positions the researcher inside of the study itself (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Additionally, phenomenological studies allow historical context and situational significance to co-mingle with participants' experiences with the phenomenon for richer contextual interpretations (van Manen, 1990). To this point, Moustakas (1994) acknowledged the significance of the reflective-interpretation process to include the underlying historical and social precepts that have impacted the phenomenon being studied.

There are two approaches to phenomenological research: transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on the descriptions of

research participants' experiences with a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although Heidegger considers hermeneutics the 'business of interpretation' (Munday, 2009), van Manen (1990) goes further with his assertion that hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science "interested in the human world as we find it in all its variegated aspects" (p. 18). Both approaches are predicated on the authentic voice of the research participants as the experts of their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach interprets participant data, as opposed to providing descriptive analysis as in the transcendental approach (van Manen, 1990). Sloan and Bowe (2014) believe hermeneutic phenomenology is uniquely tailored to provide descriptive clarification as it relates to a phenomenon and its relationship with time, space, and situation. This study is designed to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools, and thus is hermeneutic in its approach.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What were the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools?

Sub-Question One

What instructional experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement experiences?

Sub-Question Two

What interpersonal experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement experiences?

Sub-Question Three

What environmental experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement experiences?

Setting and Participants

Although the research activities were conducted virtually, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the contextual setting of the study was Atlantic Creek Public Schools (ACPS, pseudonym), an urban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. For the purposes of this study, I employed homogenous sampling and snowball sampling to solicit participants based on the shared characteristics of race, age, and prior enrollment in an ACPS public high school (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015).

Setting

ACPS was chosen because of its racial and socio-economic demographics, and its well-documented struggles with student retention, matriculation, and graduation rates. ACPS is responsible for educating nearly 80,000 students, of which at least 50% report living in low-income households. ACPS comprises 90% minority (African American and Hispanic/Latino) students, of which 78.6% of students are African American. The ACPS district-wide dropout rate averages 15%, or more than seven hundred students per academic school year, a rate 9% greater than the national average for African American students nation-wide (Bastrikin, 2020). As far back as 1997, it has been said that “some curse seems to have been cast over the public schools of the city” (Olesker, 1997).

ACPS is a centralized bureaucracy following a traditional hierarchical structure (Morgan, 2006). At the head of ACPS schools is a CEO responsible for the strategic trajectory of the school district. The second rung of ACPS leadership consists of chief officers heading up eight educational departments. These departments range from academics to human capital. ACPS is

overseen by a 10-member board of commissioners appointed by the city's mayor.

ACPS has more than thirty high schools, eighty-nine combination (elementary/middle, middle/high) schools, and almost fifty elementary schools. In the general geographic area, there are several post-secondary educational opportunities, including community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities that range from the prestigious to the affordable, as well as a host of professional and industrial apprenticeship programs (Maryland Department of Labor, 2020; University System of Maryland, 2020).

According to the United States Census Bureau (2014) and Asante-Muhammad (2017), Atlantic Creek, the city supporting ACPS, has a population greater than 500,000. The racial landscape of the city is 63% African American and 30% White, with a median household income of just over \$40,000 annually. However, the average annual income for those with education less than a high school diploma (16% of Atlantic Creek's population) drastically drops to below \$20,000. The city also reports a 14% unemployment rate among African Americans, which is three times higher than White unemployment in the city. Additionally, Atlantic Creek has had significant issues with crime. In recent years, the city averages three hundred homicides, 11,000 violent crimes, and more than 5,000 robberies, assaults, and burglaries annually.

Participants

There are several participant sampling options to consider, depending on the purpose of the research study. Unlike quantitative studies, which typically depend on many participants, qualitative studies usually seek ten to twenty participants to study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A quantitative approach may choose to sample randomly, relying on statistical probability to elucidate understandings (Patton, 2015). Qualitative options include homogenous samples in which participants share characteristics important to the study, opportunity sampling by which

coincidental participants are included in the study, or the examination of an initial occurrence of a phenomenon using an index case (Patton, 2015).

Participants had to be self-identified African Americans formerly enrolled in an ACPS public school for at least two academic years prior to leaving or graduating school, and not have been out of school more than ten years to meet the criteria for participation in the study. Any former ACPS students who met these qualifying considerations were eligible potential candidates (Patton, 2015). Twelve participants were selected from the pool based on availability and satisfying qualifications (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). I neither have, nor at the time of the study had, any form of professional or authoritative influence over any participants.

Research Positionality

To effectively position myself within the context of this study, it was important that I assess my opinions and beliefs about teaching, learning, public education in America, the stratification of race and class in America, and student engagement in general. My life experiences have cultivated my perspective on the phenomenon of student engagement, which creates what researchers have called a ‘natural attitude’ (Wagner, 2018). It was important for me to position myself within the study as an active curator of realities as lived and experienced by the research participants.

Interpretive Framework

Knowledge is socially constructed and has the potential to be transformative. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that this interpretative framework “seeks [an] understanding of the world in which [we] live and work” (p. 24) in order “to create a political debate and discussion so that change can occur” (p. 26). The context of this research is the student engagement experiences of African Americans while attending urban, public high schools. Through oral

discourse and hermeneutics, I will identify the policy and practical implications of the student engagement experiences of African Americans in urban, public-school settings and construct an interpretive analysis. Van Manen (1990) affirms the usefulness of juxtaposing social constructivism and hermeneutic phenomenology, as they both seek to interpret the lived experiences of individuals by gaining an “understanding of the evasive character of the logos of others, the whole, the communal, or the social” (p. 7). However, the interpretations spawned from hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry do not necessarily materialize into “a specific plan for addressing the injustices of the marginalized group” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 27). In this way, the research will adopt a transformative assumption, offering solutions for the “irrational and unjust structures that limit self-development and self-determination” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 26).

Philosophical Assumptions

As the researcher, it was important to define my philosophical beliefs and assumptions in the context of the study as a foundational exercise towards empirical inquiry. This section addresses my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge, as well as the value-laden nature of the study. The chosen research approach and theoretical framework are manifested by way of these assumptions throughout the course of the inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the methodology of data collection, analysis, and interpretation are also functions of the philosophical assumptions presumed in this study.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption of this research is that reality is subjective and variable. Realities are augmented by countless factors, such as histories, experiences, worldviews, socio-

economics, gender, age, geography, and race, to name but a few. Each student's engagement experiences form unique realities, from which a greater understanding of the phenomenon can be achieved (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These realities are not fixed but are instead malleable and evolving.

Epistemological Assumption

This research assumes, epistemologically, that the essence of student engagement can be understood through a hermeneutic analysis of participant data. The participant's reflective experiences with student engagement, and the collected data in the form of qualitative questionnaires, and transcribed focus group and semi-structured interview responses provide the text from which the hermeneutic interpretation emerged. The interpretations are products of the participants' experiences, contextualized by African Americans' experiences with education in American, specifically in urban, public schools. The "subjective evidence assembled based on individual views" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20) is how knowledge is constructed and known.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), for a study to be truly transformative, the 'voice' of the participants must be amplified throughout the process and participants must be solicited for solutions. The hope is that the amplified voices of participants will inform educators, stakeholders, and policymakers in their efforts to understand, improve, and sustain student engagement for African American students attending urban public schools. It is my greatest hope that this research empowers disadvantaged and marginalized communities, especially African American communities, to develop existing, plan and launch new, and expand effective educational programs and schools targeted at engaging African American students.

Axiological Assumption

My experiences as an urban, public-school educator have led me to values, beliefs, and biases about student engagement and academic achievement related to African American students. It is my belief that the issue of student engagement is the most pervasive indicator of academic achievement. My experiences have revealed that race, societal issues, and socio-economic conditions have a powerful impact on a student's orientation to, and their perceptions of, formal education, thus prescribing an individual's motivation towards student engagement. I believe these issues are further exacerbated when educators, policymakers, and the policies themselves are unfavorable to student engagement, as has been the case for generations of African American students attending America's urban public schools. I have witnessed school and school district leaders who have not been intentional about actively and effectively engaging students deemed most at risk for diminished student engagement. As removing these personal experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and convictions from this research are not feasible, nor desired, I have instead chosen to position my axiological assumptions within the study by articulating and commingling my personal notions and beliefs while actively collecting the data, producing the phenomenological themes, and interpreting the participants' experiences with student engagement. Creswell and Poth (2018) expressed the value-laden nature of the axiological assumption to both the researcher and the research participants.

Researcher's Role

My role, as researcher, was to serve as the primary instrument for interpreting participant data. It was my responsibility to clarify and amplify the voices of the participants while disclosing my personal perceptions of, and experiences with, student engagement. To do this, I examined my assumptions about the public education system and its role, historically and

currently, in the lives of African Americans. I revealed my assumptions about student engagement through the practices of reflective and reflexive journaling. Van Manen (1990) makes clear that “writing creates a distance between ourselves and the world whereby the subjectivities of daily experience become the object of our reflective awareness” (p. 127). Wall et al. (2004) suggest that a reflexive diary of our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions helps when assessing our consciousness within the context of the study. Additionally, I was conscious of my preconceptions, rooted in my experiences with student engagement, personally and professionally, throughout the study.

Procedures

The sections that follow describe the procedural steps that were undertaken prior to data collection and analysis. These steps include obtaining all necessary permissions, as well as the plan to recruit study participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss the importance of knowing, planning for, and adhering to the procedural requirements of empirical research.

Permissions

The initial step of conducting this study was to apply for approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University. After working in conjunction with the dissertation committee chair and methodologist to ensure all requirements and expectations of the Liberty University IRB were met, the application and all supporting documents were forwarded for institutional review.

After receiving full approval from the university IRB, the open-ended, qualitative questionnaire was piloted for content and face validity. Former ACPS students completed the participant consent form (Appendix A) and the qualitative questionnaire (Appendix B). The former ACPS students provided critical feedback on the data collection instrument. This

feedback was synthesized, and the instrument was calibrated to better align with the research purpose.

Recruitment Plan

Potential research participants were recruited using various means. Online platforms, including Instagram and Facebook promotions, were used to solicit qualified participants. In addition, participants were encouraged to recommend eligible individuals for potential participation in the study. Individuals interested in becoming study participants were provided a research synopsis and a link and invitation to join a Zoom informational session at predetermined dates and times. The scheduled date, time, and virtual location of this initial meeting were forwarded to interested potential participants via emails and text messages.

The initial Zoom session gave a detailed overview of the purpose and nature of the research study. I also provided a synopsis of my personal, professional, and cultural background, the topic of the proposed study, and the research implications. Potential participants were encouraged to ask questions to gain clarity of the research purpose and intent, as well as gather additional information needed to make an informed decision about proceeding as a voluntary research participant. Potential participants were informed of the data collection strategies that were to be undertaken, the voluntary nature of the study, and their role in the study. Potential participants were informed as to how their data would be analyzed, stored, and used. Potential participants were also informed that audio for both the focus group and interviews would be digitally recorded for transcription. All potential participants' questions were answered. At the conclusion of the initial Zoom session, consent forms were distributed and returned to me upon completion. This procedure was repeated until twelve individuals were identified for participation in the study.

Participants were given instructions on how to complete the qualitative questionnaire via Google Forms. To protect confidentiality, selected participants were assigned pseudonyms that were used to identify their responses for the duration of the study. Participants were instructed to respond to the writing prompts contained in the questionnaire as honestly and as thoroughly as possible. Participants were encouraged to submit their questionnaires within 48 hours of receipt. Participants' questions were addressed, and participants were forwarded the Google Form questionnaire link via email. Once completed, participants submitted their Google Forms electronically. Immediately following the receipt and review of questionnaires, I documented my reflections by way of hand-written notes.

The second phase of data collection was to conduct focus groups. There were four focus groups. Each focus group comprised three study participants. Participants logged into a Zoom meeting room at a predetermined time. Focus group participants were informed that there were seven scripted questions that they would be asked to respond to and discuss and that there would likely be follow-up questions to gain clarity as the conversation developed. Participants were reminded that the focus group interviews would be recorded for transcription. Participants were encouraged to be opinionated, yet respectful in their interactions with one another. The focus group recording began once all participant questions and concerns had been satisfied. The focus group was conducted (Appendix C). At the conclusion of the focus group, the recording was stopped. Prior to leaving the focus group Zoom sessions, participants scheduled a date and time for the participants' individual interviews if they had not already been scheduled. Individual interviews were conducted as soon after the focus group as possible. Participants were thanked and dismissed from the focus group. Immediately following the focus group sessions, I documented my reflections by way of hand-written notes.

The final data collection point for this study was to conduct individual, semi-structured interviews with participants. At the beginning of each Zoom interview, the participants were reminded that the interview would be recorded for transcription. Participants were encouraged to ask any questions related to the study and the interview prior to beginning. Once all participant questions and concerns had been addressed, the recording began, and the semi-structured interview commenced (Appendix D). At the conclusion of the interview, the recording was stopped, and the participants were thanked, informed of the next steps, and dismissed. Participants were asked to facilitate the validation of data later in the study via future communication. At the conclusion of each interview session, I documented my reflections via hand-written notes. All recorded audio from the data collection phase of research was transcribed for analysis.

Data Collection Plan

This study used three data collection points to achieve triangulation in the research results. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), triangulation is the synthesis of varying sources of data, methods, or theories to corroborate findings. Triangulating data is one way by which qualitative researchers increase the credibility and validity of their studies (Noble & Heale, 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). To achieve triangulation in this study, data was collected using an open-ended qualitative questionnaire, focus groups, and semi-structured individual interviews. Participants completed an open-ended, qualitative questionnaire, which was used to initiate participant reflections of their student engagement experiences. Questionnaires are instruments used to gather data from respondents through a series of questions or prompts (Abawi, 2013). One benefit of using questionnaires is that they provide the participants time to organize, reflect on, and edit their responses (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Four focus groups were conducted to

collect data. Focus groups are conversational and spontaneous semi-structured group interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2014). One of the greatest benefits of conducting focus groups is that ideas and concepts emerge in an organic and collaborative way. Participants were assigned to focus groups based on their scheduling availability. Lastly, participants participated in semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), an interview is a dynamic, interactive, interviewer-driven conversation designed to elicit in-depth details about a specified phenomenon. In all cases, participants were encouraged to present anecdotal accounts of their student engagement experiences (van Manen, 1990).

Questionnaires

McLeod (2018) defines a questionnaire as a research-data-collecting strategy used for the purposes of gathering information from respondents. Qualitative questionnaires are credited for generating rich data and capturing the memories, opinions, and experiences of a specific situation or phenomenon (Eckerdal & Hagström, 2017). Although traditionally quantitative, questionnaires can contribute to qualitative research when prompts are open-ended (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The open-ended, qualitative questionnaire produces a research document and data pointed authored by the respondents themselves (Sutor, 2011). Questionnaires can provide unexpected perspectives that can be further investigated during the focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews (Eckerdal & Hagström, 2017). In his 2019 study, Waldren utilized online qualitative questionnaires and found that the open-ended format allowed respondents to ‘use their own words.’ Saafin (2019) utilized qualitative questionnaires to glean more meaningful understandings of student perceptions. Qualitative questionnaires are beneficial for providing great depth and insight into participant reflections of a phenomenon and provide the ability to revise or edit these reflections.

Participants completed the open-ended, qualitative questionnaire (Appendix B) electronically. Participants were emailed a Google Forms link that would direct them to the qualitative questionnaire. Instructions for completing the questionnaire were included in the email. Participants were instructed to respond to the writing prompts contained in the questionnaire as honestly and as thoroughly as possible. Participants were encouraged to submit the questionnaire within 48 hours of receipt. The questionnaire was designed to be completed in one 30-minute sitting or less. Once completed, participants used the 'submit' button to submit their Google Form, instantly providing me with access to the data provided in the questionnaire. Immediately following the review of the questionnaires, I documented my reflection by way of hand-written notes.

According to Patton (2015), credibility is established in a qualitative study, in part, by ensuring that it is instrumentally trustworthy. To establish the face validity of this qualitative data collection instrument, it was piloted for critical feedback of both form and content. After gaining IRB approval, I piloted the instrument with five individuals who shared similar demographic criteria to the research participants. To increase the content validity of the instrument, the questionnaire was reviewed and approved by the dissertation committee prior to the start of data collection. The data collected from the questionnaire provided additional context and depth used during the data analysis phase of the research study (Patton, 2015).

Questionnaire Questions:

1. What zip code(s) did you live in while attending high school? PD
2. Which high school(s) did you attend? PD
3. What years did you attend high school? PD
4. Gender (M/F) PD

5. Age PD
6. Race/ethnicity PD
7. What were your reasons for engaging in school? CRQ
8. When you think about your high school experiences, how do you remember them? CRQ
9. What most interested you in learning during high school? Why? SQ1
10. If you had trouble understanding something in school, who would you ask for help? Why? SQ2
11. What was your favorite class? Why did you enjoy this class? SQ1
12. What was your least favorite class? Why was the class not enjoyable? SQ1
13. What do you believe motivates students to graduate high school? CRQ
14. Why do you believe students drop out of high school? CRQ
15. What is one thing you would have changed about your high school experience?
CRQ

Questions one through six document participant data (PD). Although these initial questions were not qualitative in nature, they sought to gather information pertinent to the study. Questions seven through to 14 sought to have respondents reflect on and record their experiences in urban public education. These questions were designed to elicit a reflective journaling response of their experiences with student engagement and align to the central research question and research sub-questions. Question 15 was open-ended to allow participants to contribute additional information relevant to the study. The questionnaire was field-tested by three secondary public-school educators and five individuals of a similar demographic background to the study participants. In both cases, field testers were directed not to complete the questionnaire,

but rather evaluate its form and content. Feedback gathered from the field test was used to calibrate the data collection instrument (Bagdady, 2020).

Analysis of the data collected from questionnaires followed van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative data analysis (1990). First, each participant's questionnaire was thoroughly read twice. During the second read, all significant statements and meaning units were identified and extracted from the text (Patterson & Williams, 2002; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Once all participants' significant statements and meaning units were extracted, they were reviewed. After two reviews of the extracted data, significant statements and meaning units were grouped and coded based on the similarity of response or experience. Once codes were grouped, imaginative variation was conducted to identify the sub-themes that amplified the essence of the participants' statements and responses (Austin & Sutton, 2014). The sub-themes were then hermeneutically juxtaposed to the three domains of student engagement and the basic psychological needs identified by self-determination theory and then arranged according to similarities. The significant statements, meaning units, codes, and emergent sub-themes of the questionnaires were later hermeneutically synthesized with the data collected in the focus groups and interviews in the development of the essential themes.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a researcher-led, multi-participant discussion used to collect qualitative data about a particular phenomenon (Given, 2008; Krueger & Casey, 2014; Patton, 2015). The strength of focus grouping is the emergence of this collective data that is a by-product of participants' interactions with one another (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Flynn et al., 2018). The social dynamics and conversational exchange between participants contribute to the richness of the data collected (Ryan et al., 2014). Focus groups are helpful in generating deeper

phenomenon-related insights and understandings (van Manen, 1990). These guided conversations are fluid in nature and more informal than not (Krueger & Casey, 2014). A limited number of questions are prepared in advance; however, the primary data comes from the interaction and discourse between participants (Austin & Sutton, 2014). This study was enriched by the data collected in focus groups as participants discussed their subjective experiences with student engagement with one another. To assess the focus group questions for face and content validity, the questions were piloted for critical feedback of both form and content. I piloted the instrument with five individuals who share similar demographic criteria to the potential participants. To increase the content validity, the questions were reviewed and approved by the dissertation committee prior to the start of data collection.

For this study, three participants were grouped into one of four focus groups, determined by availability. Each focus group met once for approximately 35 minutes. During the focus groups, participants were asked to respond to seven scripted questions (Appendix C) and encouraged to openly discuss each question with one another. I asked follow-up questions for clarity or depth. All focus groups were recorded using the Zoom meeting recording feature. In addition, all focus groups were recorded using the iPhone voice recorder app as a secondary audio recording device. Focus group recordings were then downloaded to an external drive for archival purposes. The focus groups were transcribed using Sonix transcription services. I intentionally keep note-taking to a minimum during focus groups and listened intently. I, and the focus group questions, served as the data collection instrument. No focus group was conducted or recorded without signed consent. At the conclusion of each focus group, I immediately made hand-written reflective notes on the focus group session.

Focus Group Questions

1. What are some things that you expect schools to provide for their students? CRQ
2. What were the factors that contributed to your engagement in school? CRQ
3. What were elements of classroom instruction that positively impacted you?
Negatively? SQ1
4. From your experiences, what makes an effective teacher? An ineffective teacher?
SQ2
5. What role did your family and friends play in your school engagement? SQ2
6. What factors do you believe cause students to drop out of school? CRQ
7. How has your high school education been of benefit to you? CRQ

Questions one and two were targeted towards the participants' concept of school, as it was important to understand the participants' ideas about the purpose of school and their personal motivation for participation in school. Motivation can be defined as the energizing force(s) that leads us to behave in a specific way (Reeve, 2012) and regulates the amount of effort exerted in a learning task (Saeed & Zyniger, 2012). Ryan and Deci (2000) defined motivation as an individual's energy, direction, persistence, and equifinality toward a specific action or intent. Research is clear that motivation is a major factor in student engagement (Cornell et al., 2016; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015). These questions were designed to be highly reflective and elicit participant responses that capture the sources for the various forms of motivation. An individual's perspective about the nature and purpose of school and their reasons for student engagement was important to this study. These questions were designed to be reflective and provide data on participants' worldviews of learning, school and education. Likewise, questions one and two spoke to autonomy, as participants were asked to develop and

articulate their personal paradigm of school engagement.

Question three directly targeted the issue of engagement and learning—more specifically, learning activities and the content and context influencing student engagement. The question was broad enough to allow for a wide range of responses from participants. These responses spawned appropriate follow-up questions. Research states that students are more engaged and have higher levels of achievement when they find interest in the content and activities provided to them (Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Saeed & Zyniger, 2012). Participant experiences with elevated levels of student engagement will provide relevant context to the types of learning activities and content which supported learning for the sample group. This question was designed to allow research participants to include teacher qualities, peer relations, curriculum, pedagogy, and any other experiences that contributed to supporting student engagement experiences.

Questions four and five targeted the interpersonal dynamics that contribute to a student's engagement levels. Verkuyten et al. (2019) and Rivera (2019) emphasized the personal relationship students have with their teachers as significant to student engagement experiences. Additionally, the dynamics of peer relationships have also been found to play a role in how students engage with school (Geraci et al., 2017).

Question six was designed to elicit student sources of motivation. It addressed the heightened dropout rate among African American students (Konold et al., 2017) and allowed the opportunity for participants to articulate the root causes confronted by members of their peer group that led to diminished student engagement and, often, school dropout (Degroote et al., 2019).

Question seven was designed as an open-ended final question to elicit idealistic responses and discourse amongst participants (Patton, 2015). This final question served as an opportunity

for participants to share their expert worldview of the phenomenon of student engagement.

To establish the face validity of this qualitative data collection instrument, it was piloted for critical feedback regarding content. Upon IRB approval, the instrument was piloted with five individuals who share similar demographic criteria as potential participants. To increase the content validity, focus group questions were reviewed and approved by the dissertation committee prior to the data collection phase of the study.

Analysis of the data collected from the focus groups followed van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative data analysis (1990). To begin, all focus group recordings were watched in their entirety twice. The recordings from the focus groups were transcribed using Sonix transcription services. Once transcribed, each focus group transcription was thoroughly read twice. During the second read, all significant statements and meaning units were identified and extracted from the text (Patterson & Williams, 2002; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Once all participants' significant statements and meaning units were extracted, they were reviewed. After two reviews of extracted data, significant statements and meaning units were grouped and coded based on the similarity of their responses or experiences. Once grouped, imaginative variation was conducted to identify the sub-themes that amplified the essence of the participants' statements and responses (Austin & Sutton, 2014). The sub-theme was then hermeneutically juxtaposed to the three domains of student engagement and the basic psychological needs identified by self-determination theory, then divided by sub-themes. The significant statements, meaning units, codes, and emergent sub-themes of the focus groups were later hermeneutically synthesized with the data collected in the questionnaires and interviews in the development of the essential themes.

Semi-Structured Interviews

An interview is a data collection method used in qualitative research that solicits direct responses from research participants about the research phenomenon (Azungah, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rubin and Rubin (2012) found the strength of an in-depth interview is its ability to elucidate the complexities of real-world experiences. In empirical research, an interview is a one-on-one conversation where the researcher asks questions of the participant and listens intently to their responses (Azungah, 2018). Interviews can be either structured, semi-structured, or unstructured depending on the purpose of the study. In all cases, interviews are recorded for later transcription (Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews begin with pre-defined, open-ended questions; however, unscripted questions can be posed to solicit research-related data and clarification (Austin & Sutton, 2014). The semi-structured interviews allow participants to engage in discourse with the researcher and provide experiential feedback related to the study and allows the researchers to ask participant-specific follow-up questions. The participants' individual perceptions and descriptions of student engagement experiences provide rich and in-depth data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Research participants participated in a semi-structured interview (Appendix D). All such interviews were recorded using the Zoom meeting recording feature. In addition, all interviews were recorded using the iPhone voice recorder app as a secondary audio recording device. Interview recordings were then downloaded to an external drive for archival purposes. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed using Sonix transcription services. I intentionally kept notetaking to a minimum. I, along with the interview questions, served as the data collection instrument. No interview was conducted or recorded without a signed consent of participation. To assess the semi-structured interview

questions for face and content validity, the questions were piloted for critical feedback regarding both form and content. I piloted the interview questions with five individuals who shared similar demographic criteria to the potential participants. To increase the content validity, the interview questions were reviewed and approved by the dissertation committee prior to the data collection phase of the study.

Interview Questions

1. Where did you attend high school? PD
2. When did you graduate or stop attending? PD
3. When you were in school, what did you aspire to be? Why? Icebreaker
4. When you were in school, how did you feel about school? Why? CRQ
5. How much effort did you put into learning? Explain? SQ1
6. What classes and/or lessons did you find most interesting? Why? SQ1
7. Tell me about an assignment that you enjoyed doing. SQ1
8. What types of assignments did you not enjoy? Why? SQ1
9. In what ways did your friends or classmates impact your school experiences? SQ2
10. What does it look like when someone is engaged in school? CRQ
11. How did you know when you were engaged in school? CRQ
12. What makes you want to engage in learning? CRQ
13. What do you believe teachers should do to help students learn? SQ2
14. What do you believe schools could do to help students achieve? SQ3
15. What role did your family have in your interest in school? SQ2
16. Tell me about the neighborhood or the area your high school was in. SQ3
17. Tell me something that would have increased your student engagement. CRQ

18. What else would you like to share about student engagement, even if it is something I did not ask about? CRQ

Questions one and two were intended to identify where and when the participant attended ACPS high schools, while question three was designed as an icebreaker to build rapport and gather basic background information (Patton, 2015).

Question four was designed to elicit the participant's affective disposition to school in general. The question served as a starting point from which to access the participant's experiences as a student. How students feel about school is a factor that contributes to overall student engagement (Olson & Peterson, 2015) and the level of connectedness to the learning environment (Saeed & Zyniger, 2012).

Student engagement is often, at least in part, defined as effort towards a learning task (Kurt & Tas, 2018; Olson & Peterson, 2015). Question five asked participants to reflect on their cognitive investment in the teaching and learning process. It required participants to internalize their experiences with engagement.

Questions six through eight were intended to extrapolate pedagogical experiences that lead to student engagement. The literature indicates that when students are interested in the learning activities, they tend to be more engaged (Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015), especially African American students (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). The participants' lived experiences with various types of pedagogical practices were an essential component of this study.

Questions nine and 15 focused on the role of interpersonal relationships students have with their friends and family as it related to their student engagement experiences. During adolescence, peer associations have a major influence over young people. Carrabba and Farmer (2018) found the influence of peers is related to behavioral and academic engagement in school.

Additionally, Bellibas (2016) and Fernandez-Suarez et al. (2016) pointed to the importance of the family's predisposition towards and value of education as they relate to a student's level of engagement.

Questions 10 and 11 sought to solicit specific behaviors or dispositions that indicate student engagement. Saeed and Zyniger (2012) cited persistence, hand-raising, asking questions, and taking initiative as behavioral indicators of student engagement. These questions directed the participants to reflect on their experiences with learning and the behaviors that are associated with it.

Question 12 was targeted towards motivation and the underlying source of that motivation. Students' reasons for engaging in school reveal if their sources of motivation are autonomous or controlled (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wijsman et al., 2018). Participant responses to question 12 disclosed what worked to successfully engage them.

Questions 13 and 14 asked participants to identify what teachers can do to increase student engagement. Teachers have a tremendous role to play in student engagement (Yanik, 2018; Sabin, 2015). The research participants shared their experiential perspectives of the character traits and behaviors of teachers who facilitate elevated levels of student engagement.

Question 16 gave the participants an opportunity to elaborate on how the school and the learning environment impacted their student engagement experiences. Fatou and Kubiszewski, (2018) and Reeve (2012) acknowledged that *where* students learn can play a role in their levels of engagement. The final two questions were designed to elicit the widest possible input from the participant on the issue of student engagement.

Analysis of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews followed van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative data analysis (1990). Each participant's

interview was watched twice from start to finish. The recordings from the interviews were transcribed using Sonix transcription services. Once transcribed, each interview transcription was thoroughly read twice. During the second read, all significant statements and meaning units were identified and extracted from the text (Patterson & Williams, 2002; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Once all participants' significant statements and meaning units were extracted, they were reviewed. After two reviews of the extracted data, significant statements and meaning units were coded and grouped based on the similarity of the response or experience. Once they were coded, imaginative variation was conducted to identify the sub-themes that amplified the essence of the participants' statements and responses (Austin & Sutton, 2014). The sub-theme was then hermeneutically juxtaposed to the three domains of student engagement and the basic psychological needs identified by self-determination theory, then divided by sub-themes. The significant statements, meaning units, codes, and emergent sub-themes of the interviews were later hermeneutically synthesized with the data collected in the questionnaire and focus group in the development of the essential themes.

Data Synthesis

The data collected in this study was analyzed using van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative data analysis (1990). First, two thorough reviews of all collected data were conducted, and all significant statements or meaning units were identified. Meaning units are any passage identified as being related to the phenomenon being studied (Patterson & Williams, 2002; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Next, the identified meaning units and significant statements were coded. Coding in qualitative research is a process of incrementally transforming raw data into functional, interconnected, and interpretive data (Austin & Sutton, 2014). Once coded, data was sorted and arranged, and sub-themes were developed based on the

synthesis of coded data. Iterations of sub-themes rendered the essential themes. *Themes* are defined in the literature as elements that frequently occur in a text (van Manen, 1990). Finally, textural, structural, and composite descriptions of the student engagement experiences of the participants were used to produce policy and practice implications. The outlined data analysis process is described in greater detail in the section that follows.

Identifying Significant Statements and Meaning Units

The first step of analysis was to immerse into the collected data. While conducting this initial text analysis, memoing and phenomenological reflection were undertaken. According to Birks et al. (2008), memoing is useful in “assisting the researcher in making conceptual leaps from raw data to those abstractions that explain research phenomena in the context in which it is examined” (p. 68). According to the authors, researchers can “immerse” themselves, explore meanings, be more reflexive, and better ensure continuity when memoing is exercised.

Using the questionnaires, transcripts, and recordings, I identified all significant statements found in the collected data. Using van Manen’s (1990) selective approach for isolating the thematic aspects of a phenomenon, all significant statements related to student engagement (behavioral, cognitive, or affective) or self-determination theory’s basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) were isolated into essential textual elements, or meaning units (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

A major feature of hermeneutic phenomenology is the use of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle brings balance to the study as it allows researchers to reference a phenomenon holistically and by its various parts or components (van Manen, 1990). Sloan and Bowe (2014) agree that cross-referencing the parts against the whole and vice-versa enables researchers to discover and interpret meaning more effectively. In this study, the hermeneutic circle was

employed to interpret participants' experiences with student engagement and basic needs satisfaction, and how those experiences coalesce or diverge from the other responses and responders.

Identification and Development of Essential Themes

The codes extrapolated from meaning units in the initial analysis served to conceptualize ideas and make the text more 'approachable' from a phenomenological perspective (van Manen, 1990). The second phase of data analysis, however, was to reduce the codes into themes by conducting imaginative variation to produce essential themes (Husserl, 1999) based on the domains of student engagement and self-determination theory's three basic psychological needs. By the nature of hermeneutic phenomenology, this analysis of themes was both imaginative (or re-imaginative) and iterative (van Manen, 1990).

According to van Manen (1990), themes refer to interpreted, recurring elements in the data collected which give control to the research and writing process. "The notion of theme is used in various disciplines in the humanities, art, and literary criticism" (van Manen, 1990, p. 78). Themes, as defined in the literature, are frequently found occurrences of language or ideas found in the collected text and provide order to the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2014). The essential themes, those themes that speak to the *whatness* or *essence* of a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990), focus on the essential relationship to the student engagement domains and self-determination theory. Once essential themes were developed, coded meaning units were cross-referenced with original significant statements and assigned to appropriate thematic groupings. After the data was aligned and arranged, I proceeded with interpreting the phenomenological themes, giving them their empirical voice and power (van Manen, 1990).

Development of Interpretations and Implications

The participants' responses served as the hermeneutic text from which descriptions of student engagement experiences were derived and interpreted. These textual and in vivo descriptions were aligned thematically as they related to student engagement (behavioral, cognitive, affective) and the self-determination theory framework (autonomy, competence, relatedness). Using the hermeneutic circle, interpretations and implications for policy and practice were articulated. Creswell and Poth (2018) identified structural and textual descriptions as reflective of the setting and context of a phenomenon, thus rendering them useful for identifying the implications. The structural and textual descriptions were aligned existentially to better understand how student engagement was experienced by participants in their lifeworld and lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). In the case of both policy and practical implications, the goal was to construct the essence of student engagement for African Americans attending urban public schools and initiate positive change. Lastly, the theoretical and empirical implications were synthesized to move self-determination theory and the student engagement phenomenon forward.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is defined in the literature as the degree of rigor, credibility, believability, dependability, and confirmability of the research and research design (Connelly, 2016; Rose & Johnson, 2020). For the qualitative researcher, trustworthiness is related to the integrity and validity of the study and its findings. To build the trustworthiness of the data analyzed in this study, peer/expert review, triangulation, and member checks were used. Peer/expert review increases trustworthiness by “distinguishing high-quality work” (Patton, 2015, p. 1286). Triangulation consisted of using multiple data collection strategies and the

synthesis of those data points to provide insight into a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Member checks allowed for the validation and accuracy of interpretations (Brit et al., 2016). Lastly, I positioned myself into the research study and disclosed my philosophical and cultural perspective of the phenomenon being studied. Patton (2015) argues the importance of disclosing not only the product of empirical research but also its processes.

Credibility

Credibility can be understood as the degree of confidence in the accurate articulation of interpreted participant input (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Joko, 2015). I used triangulation to ensure maximum trustworthiness. Triangulation utilizes multiple data sources to produce better alignment of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I triangulated the data by collecting data from participants via questionnaires, focus groups, and personal interviews. In addition to student engagement, the theoretical framework used to provide analysis of data was also triangulated. This study used the components of self-determination theory to interpret the meaning of participants' experiences in respect to student engagement.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which the research's results can be applicable under different terms and conditions. It provides the ability to make reasonable comparable assumptions due to similar characteristics or traits (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The results of this study may also be applicable to other urban schools and school districts experiencing diminished student engagement in their minority or otherwise marginalized students. The experiences of the research participants may provide voice to other students from similar or same socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, the results found in this study may prove applicable to Hispanic or native American students attending urban public high schools.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability are measures designed to authenticate the participants' lived experiences and validate the study's results. For this study, I addressed the dependability by soliciting peer review from my dissertation committee members. In accordance with van Manen's (1990) approach to hermeneutic phenomenology data analysis, confirmability was obtained through interviews with research participants to allow for critical feedback and increased interpretive clarity and insight. Additionally, participants were asked to conduct member checks to ensure their perspectives were accurately captured. This form of member checking, also referred to as respondent validation, authenticated the accuracy of interpretations (Brit et al., 2016).

Ethical Considerations

It was important that this study was conducted with the highest degree of ethical consideration. Prior to beginning the research study, I obtained the necessary approval from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). All research participants were encouraged to ask questions that would help guide their decision-making, understanding, and participation throughout the study. All participants were required to complete an informed consent form to indicate their voluntary participation in the study prior to commencing. To ensure that all participants maintained their confidentiality, the research participants, and all other identifiable entities, were assigned pseudonyms.

One potential ethical consideration that was closely considered and monitored is the power imbalance that may have pre-existed due to the researcher-participant dynamics of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, I openly addressed the issue of hierarchical imbalance with research participants directly and mitigated these differences through discourse

and rapport building. As a part of the data analysis process, participants were solicited to conduct member checks to ensure that their voices were accurately interpreted. In these ways, I hoped to redistribute power to the research participants.

All audio recordings, Google Forms questionnaires, and transcripts of interviews, focus groups, and reflections were stored on an independent external hard drive and to a cloud server, both of which are password protected. In addition, all hand-written notes were stored inside sealed brown document envelopes. The envelopes are stored inside a locked filing cabinet. Individual participant source data will not be used for any other research study or purposes without the consent of the participants.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to present the research methods used in this study. The research design, the research questions, setting, and participants were outlined, and a rationale was provided for each. A detailed description of research procedures was then presented. In alignment with interpretive research methods, my role in the study was identified and clarified. The use of survey questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews were introduced as the chosen data collection strategies used in the study. Strategies for data analysis were discussed, as well as considerations of trustworthiness and ethical research practices.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. It is my intent to unveil the experiences that supported or thwarted the engagement of former students. This chapter provides descriptions of the twelve research participants, the collected data in the form of tables and themes, and responses to the research's central question and sub-questions. This chapter concludes with a summary of the information found.

Participants

In total, 12 former ACPS students took part in this research study (Table 1). Homogeneous sampling and snowball sampling were utilized to identify study participants. Each participant met the study eligibility requirements: African American, no longer enrolled in ACPS due to having graduated or dropped out within the last 10 years, and attended at least one ACPS high school for a minimum of two academic years. Individuals who responded to social media posts on Facebook and Instagram were reviewed and selected. In addition, several participants were referred through snowball sampling. The sample included eight women and four men who attended 10 different ACPS high schools and graduated or left school between the years of 2010 and 2020. Ten of the 12 participants graduated, while two stopped attending before graduating. Of the 10 graduates, nine reported having some level of post-secondary education, ranging from law school to trade schools, while one participant is a self-employed, owner-operator of a small business. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym that will serve as their name throughout this chapter.

Table 1*Research Participants*

| Name | Gender | Ethnicity | Age | Years Attended | HS Outcome |
|--------|--------|------------------|-----|----------------|-------------|
| Sonya | F | African American | 32 | 2004-2010 | Graduated |
| Faith | F | African American | 31 | 2006-2010 | Graduated |
| Jewel | F | African American | 27 | 2008-2012 | Graduated |
| Selah | F | African American | 26 | 2009-2013 | Graduated |
| Tonya | F | African American | 26 | 2009-2013 | Graduated |
| Ahmad | M | African American | 24 | 2011-2015 | Graduated |
| Bianca | F | African American | 24 | 2011-2015 | Graduated |
| Leslie | F | African American | 22 | 2013-2017 | Graduated |
| Denzel | M | African American | 21 | 2014-2017 | Dropped Out |
| Kendra | F | African American | 20 | 2015-2019 | Graduated |
| Maleek | M | African American | 20 | 2016-2019 | Dropped Out |
| Jaleel | M | African American | 18 | 2016-2020 | Graduated |

Sonya

Sonya was an articulate, outspoken, 32-year-old woman who showed great enthusiasm to participate in the research study. Sonya attended five different ACPS schools during her high school tenure. When asked about the five high schools she attended, Sonya stated that she noticed considerable differences from one school to the next. These differences were in physical resources, program offerings, school safety, and even parental involvement. Sonya said that the school she enjoyed the most had great afterschool programs. However, when asked about her

school experiences in general, this aspiring writer reported, “outside of my afterschool programs and my English class, I really didn’t like it.” More than anything, for Sonya, attending school was a means to escape a troubled homelife, which is significant when considering Sonya went on to report that there was “a lot going on” at school. “The violence was crazy. It’s been times when people were stabbed, somebody got shot while we [were] in school. It was a lot of fights. We had gang problems. It was a lot.” Still, school was where her friends and supports were. “[She] met a lot of people in high school that really helped me make it through. Like, my home situation wasn’t great. [School] was my safe haven.”

Faith

Faith was a 31-year-old woman. She was very thoughtful and deliberate about her participation in the data collection process. Faith graduated from what she considers to be one of the best high schools in the ACPS school district, “if not the best.” Faith self-reported elevated levels of student engagement throughout her school experiences. “[She] loved school and wanted to be challenged. [She] wanted to go to college, [She] had an urge to learn. [She] put in a lot of effort.” Faith actively sought out International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) courses throughout her high school tenure. Faith also reported that her friends also took their academics seriously. “[She] had great friends that [she] went to school with. Friends that cared about their grades. And it kind of made high school better and made high school go well.” Faith also revealed that her parents were “big on school” and “were very supportive of [her and her siblings] and they really did push [them] to do better.” Faith’s parents often helped her with her schoolwork, although at times she felt they were stricter than they needed to be. Faith said her school engagement may have been even higher “if [her] parents weren’t so strict and allowed

[her] to do more after school activities.” Faith said that she always knew that she was college-bound and maintained that was her primary focus while attending high school.

Jewel

Jewel was a well-spoken 27-year-old woman who graduated high school in 2012. Jewel was a goal-oriented high school student who knew the career path that she wanted to pursue after graduation. Jewel emphasized throughout the data collection the need for school community and a sense of belonging. Jewel said that she enjoyed it when “teachers fostered that sense of community in the classroom.” She was an active student who “wanted to learn” and stated, “it was the programs that really pushed [her].” Jewel had “very diligent parents,” especially her mom who, “inculcated within [her], not only the ability to learn, but the want to learn and the excitement to learn.” Jewel stated that her high school experience was of benefit to her by being the place where she “crafted a good bit of [her] personality, learned about professionalism, learned a lot about endurance, and learned about goal-setting.” Although Jewel felt “optimistic” while in high school, she also “felt like [her] education was incomplete.” As a result, “there was always supplemental work that needed to be done because [she] did not feel challenged by [her] curriculum.” Although Jewel had a positive experience with her education, she recognized that many of her classmates, “didn’t have that drive. They weren’t there for a purpose. They were just there because they were supposed to be there.”

Selah

Selah was a charming and astute 26-year-old young professional and graduate student. Selah graduated high school in 2013 and is working in the field that she aspired to when she was a high school student. Selah said that she liked school and was involved in several clubs and organizations. Selah even served as a class officer. When asked about her motivation for school

engagement, Selah stated she wanted to “not only make [her] parents proud, but also be the first in [her] family to attend and graduate college.” Selah emphasized the importance of having a learning environment conducive to learning. Selah credited “a judge free zone, [she felt] like [she] wasn’t judged because [she] didn’t know something and [she] felt comfortable enough to be able to ask, whether it was [her] peers or a teacher.” From an instructional perspective, Selah valued clear and concise expectations from the teacher:

Don’t just assume that [students] know things—[she] would rather have it written out in front of [her]. Because [she] hate[d] when teachers assume. So, just tell [her] what you want from [her], and then [she] can get it done.

Selah brought to light the significance of relevant work and assignments. She said, “Don’t just give [students] something because, ‘oh we need to do an extra paper’ like make it make sense, make it feel like ... there’s a purpose behind it.”

Tonya

Tonya, a spirited and motivated 26-year-old woman, graduated from a vocational school in 2013. Tonya recalled her high school experiences as being “disappointing for the most part” and that she “didn’t really get much out of it.” Tonya reported that she did not feel safe in her school because “it wasn’t a safe environment. It was too ghetto. Very ghetto! There were drug dealers outside. People were getting shot around the corners. It was bad.” In addition to negative experiences with the learning environment, Tonya also expressed disappointment in the academic content and her teachers:

[She] think[s] they need to restructure the curriculum system. Make it a little more updated so that it’s more relatable ... and make sure that their teachers are doing their

part as well, not just feeding information and not making sure that it's being actually received.

Tonya's biggest hope is that schools will be a place where students will "be able to want to learn and not have to go to school and worry about being bullied, or just comfortable so that they are able to learn."

Ahmad

Ahmad was a reserved, yet witty, 24-year-old young man who graduated from high school in 2015. Although Ahmad did not attend college or a university, he did pursue vocational training and now works in information technology. Ahmad admitted that he "hated school, to be honest. [He] didn't really like it. [He] didn't want to be doing piles of homework and doing a lot... [he] just did the least amount just to get by." Ahmad largely attributes his apathetic disposition towards school due to poor relationships with teachers. "They didn't ... make learning seem fun. It was just like they came there for that paycheck. And so that was really what kind of turned [him] off." Conversely, Ahmad credits his passion for IT and his current career to a relationship that he developed with an influential teacher. "It was like in 12th grade when it kind of clicked for [him]. That's when [their] teacher had changed, and she and [Ahmad] guess . . . [he] feed[s] off energy and her energy was so high and it just . . . it really got a lot of [them] inspired in IT."

Bianca

Bianca was a highly opinionated and charismatic 24-year-old young woman. A 2015 high school graduate, she is currently enrolled in law school. Bianca was thoughtful in her responses and on multiple occasions jotted down notes during the focus group and semi-structured

interview. On more than one occasion Bianca stated, “[She] hated school,” “[She] hated [her] school,” and “[She] still hates school.” Bianca recalled feeling:

severely anxious, extremely depressed, and crying on [her] way to school almost every day during my senior year. [She] skipped as many days as [she] could, as well as coming late or leaving early. [She] didn’t like high school at all. The environment wasn’t comfortable or welcoming. [Students] had to ‘get in where [they] fit in’ without a lot of help from faculty and staff.

Bianca felt disenchanting with school for various reasons, including “the school day, for one, is too long. [Students] didn’t get breaks. [She] feels like teachers aren’t equipped to give instruction based on different learning styles.” One of the worst parts of attending school for Bianca was its inconvenience. “The only way for [her] to get to school was to catch, [she] believe[s], three buses, in which case [she]’d have to be on [her] first bus stop at around 5:00 AM.” Even still, Bianca self-reported having an elevated level of student engagement because she believed good grades in high school was “what’s ultimately going to get [her] to the next step.”

Leslie

Leslie was a vivacious and upbeat 22-year-old young woman. Leslie is an entrepreneur who never attended college. Leslie self-reported largely having positive high school experiences, although “it was a little hard to understand sometimes, some lessons because they move too fast. [Students] really didn’t get time to learn it.” Leslie thinks that teachers should “take an extra couple of days to thoroughly go through the lesson... move at the students’ pace, not at the school’s pace.” Additionally, Leslie attributes teacher disposition to the level of student engagement:

certain teachers bring certain energies. So, you know, a teacher all hype, [students are] going to want to learn from that teacher because they seem like the cool teacher, but [if] the teacher that's older and, you know, maybe a little dry, [students are] not going to really want to learn from them because it's going to be boring.

Leslie concluded that her high school experience has not been of great benefit to her and that “it hasn't done that much for [her] because ... [she] didn't go to college, so [she] didn't really have to carry most of that stuff with [her].”

Denzel

Denzel was a personable, bright-eyed, and energetic 21-year-old young man. Denzel works as a freelance auto-detailer. Denzel dropped out in 2017, the beginning of his junior year of high school. When asked about his decision to drop out of school, Denzel said, “[he] had to take care of [himself]. So, [he] just had to make a choice.” Denzel said that his school-based supporter was his football coach, as he “wanted to be one of the top athletes” in his school. Denzel said that his coach had “so much hope for [him]. Like he [saw] something in [him] like, that nobody had seen.” Outside of his coach, Denzel generally felt that the other adults in his school, “didn't care, they wouldn't be there for [students].” Denzel mentioned the lack of support several times. When asked about what he would have changed about his high school experience, Denzel replied, “better teachers could help more than what they [are] doing ... [he] really like the teachers really stepping in for [students]” and “some teachers come to school for just a paycheck.” Although Denzel reported that his parents were supportive of education, he also acknowledged that the “things that was missing for [him] was ... better parenting. [He] wish[es] [his] parents [saw] something that they not experiencing ... help [him and his siblings] build off

of what [they] went through ... because [he] wouldn't want [his] child to go through the same things.”

Kendra

Kendra graduated from high school in 2019 and is currently enrolled as an undergraduate college student. Kendra is a soft-spoken, yet sociable, 20-year-old young lady who was introspectively expressive of her thoughts and ideas throughout the data collection processes. Kendra said, “[she didn’t] remember much of [her] high school experiences, [her] high school mainly focused on academics, so [they] didn’t really do fun things. Students had to make things enjoyable for [themselves].” Kendra affirmed that she believes that teacher support and relevant academic content are critical to student engagement. Kendra believed she would have had more engagement if she received “more feedback from teachers. If [she] had a little more . . . personal connection with the teachers and . . . a personal connection with the lesson, [she] think[s] that would have helped [her].” Kendra, on more than one occasion, discussed the importance of fun and interesting lessons. “[Teachers] don’t make lessons fun, like, it [doesn’t] make [students] want to actually learn about it or pay attention” and said that in school she has even thought, “why am I even here?” Ultimately, Kendra acknowledges that her high school experiences have been beneficial and made her transition to college easier.

Maleek

Maleek is a reserved, 20-year-old young man who attended two ACPS public schools between 2016 and 2019. Maleek dropped out of traditional high school to enroll in the Job Corps, where he earned his General Education Diploma (GED). Maleek currently works as a freelance auto-detailer and is taking college classes online. Maleek aspires to study law in the future. When asked about school, Maleek recalled that he “didn’t want to be there. [He] hate[d]

school ... because it was a waste of time. There was nothing to do. [They were] just sit[ting] in the class.” Maleek said that he initially put a lot of effort into school and learning but grew discouraged when he failed to be supported in the classroom. Maleek affirmed that there was “no help. It’s like we’re just out here by yourself. So, what’s the point of going to school if you’re not getting no help, I’ll just go out in the streets and do my own thing.” Maleek was critical of teachers and their lack of motivation to reach students. He reported that teachers would “always [be] sitting down just on their phones. [He] had a lot of teachers like that. They just sit down on their phone. Just there. Basically, they force [students] to the street.”

Jaleel

Jaleel was an 18-year-old young man who graduated from high school in 2020. Jaleel was amiable and forthright. He currently works for Amazon as a package handler and is attending community college studying computer programming. Jaleel recalled his high school experiences as “a waste of time. It was dumb in [his] eyes because [he] knew everything they were trying to teach [him].” Throughout the data collection, Jaleel expressed his dissatisfaction with the lack of academic support that his teachers provided to him while he was in school. Jaleel admitted, “[he] just don’t like when the teachers ain’t help when [he] need[ed] help ... more support ... [he] didn’t have moral support.” Conversely, Jaleel stated that one of the most impactful contributors of his engagement was “when teachers started giving [him] compliments [like], ‘I ain’t know you were this smart’.” Although Jaleel expressed a love for the sciences and science projects, he also expressed teachers “should make the assignments more fun and entertaining” and that if students “get an incentive for something[s], school will go a lot better.” Jaleel also discussed the unfavorable elements in the community as being significant. “It was a

lot of dope fiends. A lot of addicts, a lot of drugs, being used around there. A lot of guns, a lot of fighting and it was just there.”

Results

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The data for this study was collected using open-ended qualitative questionnaires, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews completed by the twelve voluntary research participants. Trustworthiness and respondent validation was ensured by asking each of the 12 participants to review their focus group and semi-structured interview transcripts for accuracy. Research participants provided clarity and verified the validity of their transcripts.

Following van Manen’s (1990) approach to analyzing hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative data, thorough reviews of the questionnaires and focus group and semi-structured interview recordings and transcripts were conducted. All significant statements related to behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagements and self-determination theory’s basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were identified and manually coded. These codes were then sorted and grouped based on similar or related codes found within the collected data. The codes, or textual units, were reduced using imaginative variation into five essential themes and sixteen sub-themes (see Table 2). Any statements not deemed significant to the study’s purpose were identified and excluded. Following the principles of the hermeneutic circle, I juxtaposed the significant statements, identified codes, various forms of student engagement, psychological needs, and the research central question and sub-questions with the deduced essential themes to interpret the student engagement experiences for the research

participants. The five essential themes which emerged from the research data were: Engagement Experiences, Instructional Considerations, Relationships, School-Related Experiences, and Non-School-Related Factors.

Table 2

Essential Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes

| Essential Theme | Sub-Themes | Codes | Frequency | |
|------------------------|------------|--|---------------------|----|
| Engagement Experiences | Feelings | Recollection of school experiences | 19 | |
| | | Amount of effort | 8 | |
| | | Lasting benefits of school experiences | 22 | |
| | | Relevant and practical instruction | 9 | |
| | Desires | Hands-on learning | 12 | |
| | | Understanding | 5 | |
| | | Extracurriculars | 14 | |
| | | Support | 27 | |
| | | Competence | 11 | |
| | | Engagement | 21 | |
| | Supports | Something of interest | | |
| | | My teacher | 18 | |
| | | | Relevance of course | 18 |

| | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|----|
| | | Types of assignments | 9 |
| | | Intrinsic motivators | 7 |
| | | Extrinsic motivators | 5 |
| | | Integrated motivators | 3 |
| | | The “End Game” | 11 |
| | Engagement | Not good at it | 8 |
| | Suppressors | | |
| | | My teacher | 16 |
| | | Irrelevance | 6 |
| | | Types of assignments | 4 |
| | | Hardships of life | 11 |
| | | Boredom | 7 |
| | | Classroom climate | 14 |
| Instructional Considerations | Teachers | Positive Impact on Students | 20 |
| | | Negative Impact on Students | 12 |
| | | Cultural Competence | 6 |
| | Pedagogy | Project-Based | 12 |
| | | Boring | 10 |
| | | Interactive | 11 |
| | | Social | 6 |
| | | Student-Centric | 10 |

| | | | |
|----------------------------|------------------|------------------------|----|
| | | Traditional Pacing | 8 |
| | Relevance | Real-World Application | 23 |
| | | Cultural Relevance | 8 |
| | | Incentives Learning | 6 |
| Relationships | Peers | Supporters | 26 |
| | | Distractors | 10 |
| | Families | Champions | 25 |
| | | Challenges | 6 |
| | Teachers | Encouragers | 19 |
| | | Discouragers | 16 |
| | Other Supporters | Counselors | 12 |
| | | Influencers | 6 |
| | | Coaches | 3 |
| School-Related Experiences | Intangibles | Community | 10 |
| | | Scheduling | 9 |
| | | Misbehavior | 5 |
| | | Climate and Culture | 17 |
| | | Safety | 5 |
| | | Transportation | 2 |
| | Tangibles | Facilities | 3 |
| | | Resources | 15 |
| | | Food | 5 |
| | Extracurriculars | Programs | 10 |

| | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|----|
| | | Sports | 4 |
| Non-School-Related Factors | Hardships | Home-Life | 15 |
| | | Economic Challenges | 5 |
| | | Teenage Pregnancy | 3 |
| | Community Concerns | Chaos | 9 |
| | | Drugs | 7 |
| | | Violence | 8 |

Engagement Experiences

Study participants recounted their student engagement experiences in terms of how they felt about school, what they desired from school, and the educational supports and suppressors they experienced. Participants had a wide range of student engagement experiences covering both positive and negative accounts. When expressing feelings about her school experiences, Bianca said that she “hated school” and added that she felt “the school day, for one, is too long” and “teachers aren’t equipped.” Conversely, Jewel had highly favorable student engagement experiences that she attributed to her academic achievement and success.

Table 3

Engagement Experiences: Sub-Themes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes

| Sub-Themes | Codes | In Vivo Quotes |
|--------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| <u>How Students Felt</u> | School Experiences | “I hated it, to be honest.” |
| | Amount of Effort | “I put a little bit into learning.” |
| | Lasting Benefits of School Experiences | “It really didn't teach me nothing.” |

| | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| <u>What Students Desired</u> | Relevant and Practical Instruction | “It’s like all about how you can use it in life.” |
| | Hands-On Learning | “Getting them out of just reading the textbook, you know, different activities where you can create things.” |
| | Understanding | “Just be open-minded because everybody has their own story.” |
| | Extracurriculars | “If they actually had colleges coming to talk to us or something.” |
| | Support | “Somebody else outside of your teachers that you can go and talk to.” |
| | Competence | “People don’t really understand it. That’d be the problem.” |
| <u>Engagement Supports</u> | Something of Interest | “Trade class just helped me explore and see what I wanted do in life.” |
| | My Teacher | “She had a positive impact on me ...” |
| | Relevance of Course | “Relating it to more so everyday experiences so that it’s easier to grasp the concept.” |
| | Types of Assignments | “Hands-on projects, those were of course, the more attractive because I’m a hands-on person.” |
| | Intrinsic Motivators | “I always liked learning.” |

| | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|---|
| | Extrinsic Motivators | “My mother, she made me go.” |
| | Integrated Motivators | “It’s ultimately going to get you to the next step.” |
| | The “End Game” | “I wanted to go to college.” |
| <u>Engagements</u> | Not Good At It | “I never felt that I had a knack for it.” |
| <u>Suppressors</u> | | |
| | My Teacher | “Teachers could help more than what they be doing.” |
| | Irrelevance | “It’s a lot of stuff they teach you, but after school it be useless.” |
| | Types of Assignments | “Class work, just regular class work.” |
| | Hardships of Life | “Definitely life.” |
| | Boredom | “They didn’t make school interesting. It was boring.” |
| | Classroom Climate | “I didn’t want to engage because my classmates were so rowdy ...” |

How Students Felt

The participants recalled their engagement experiences in terms of their overall experiences with their urban, public-school and the ultimate benefit those educational experiences have proven to be in their lives. Maleek reported that, “It really didn’t teach me nothing. They haven’t benefited me anyway, for real. Only – common sense, but it ain’t teach me nothing. No, not at all.” Ahmad reported how his feelings about school changed after feeling

unsupported by teachers. “I just feel back and then all my grades just turned mediocre because I wasn’t invested in school as much as I was in the beginning.”

What Students Desired

Participants expressed that they did not believe that they received the types of education that would have led to greater levels of student engagement. Many participants echoed Bianca’s sentiments about relevant, practical, and hands-on instruction. “So, it wasn’t always about learning what was like presented in the textbook. It was about getting the hands-on experiences that you weren’t able to get.” Selah emphasized that students have a desire for understanding. “Just be open-minded because everybody has their own story. You never know what people are really going through or what they’ve dealt with in their past, regardless of their age.”

Additionally, participants expressed the desire for greater access to extracurricular activities, including tutoring, more professional supports, and a greater level of academic skill mastery, upon entering high school. Maleek puts it this way: “people don’t really understand [the work]. That’d be the problem.”

Engagement Supports

Participants identified several factors that led to higher levels of engagement. These factors included intrinsic, extrinsic, and integrated motivators. From an intrinsic perspective, participants acknowledged that the personal interest levels, relevance of the courses, and type of assignments assigned had a significant impact on their levels of engagement. Leslie commented, hands-on projects, those were of course, the more attractive because [she is] a hands-on person.” Tonya believes that “relating it to... everyday experiences so that it’s easier to grasp the concept” is a means to foster higher levels of engagement. Teachers are an important source of extrinsic motivation supporting engagement. Kendra said, “She had a positive impact on me”

when discussing how her favorite teacher was able to push her to a greater level of classroom engagement. Family can also serve as extrinsic motivation. Jaleel expressed, “[his] mother, she would [say] ‘go to school and don’t fail’. She would say to him ‘if [he didn’t] go to school, [he would have to] get the f%\$# out of my house’.” For Bianca, engagement was simply a means towards a desired end:

[She] always felt like [she] wasn’t really good at anything else. [She] didn’t have an additional tactic to get chosen for college or leadership positions or internships, because [she] didn’t play sports and [she] wasn’t in clubs, [she] wasn’t in organizations.

Engagement Suppressors

Participants cited the factors that supported engagement can also have an inverse effect. For example, Denzel points to role of teachers in suppressing engagement. “Teachers could help more than what they [are].” When reflecting on the relevance of courses and course work Maleek stated, “It’s a lot of stuff they teach you, but after school it be useless.” In addition, Sonya added, “They didn’t make school interesting. It was boring.” When asked about school and class climate, Bianca responded, “I didn’t want to engage because my classmates were so rowdy.”

Instructional Considerations

Without exception, the study participants reported the significance of the teacher’s disposition, the pedagogy deployed, and the nonsensical nature of instructional content as instructional experiences that supported or thwarted their levels of engagement behind the classroom door. Several participants agreed with Tonya when she said, “I felt like [my education] was just to get city kids to say they got their high school diploma. [She doesn’t] think they necessarily cared whether they were educating [students].”

Table 4*Instructional Considerations: Sub-Themes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes*

| Sub-Themes | Codes | In Vivo Quotes |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|--|
| <u>Teachers Matter Most</u> | Positive Impacts | “She had so much energy. That really made the class interesting.” |
| | Negative Impacts | “I had teachers that I didn’t necessarily connect with.” |
| | Cultural Competence | “Teacher should be more familiar with that specific or, not area, environment, so they understand why certain students can't focus.” |
| <u>Pedagogy</u> | Project-Based | “I think I was doing this little project ... and I like doing it.” |
| | Boring | “... maybe a little dry you’re not going to really want to learn from them because it’s going to be boring.” |
| | Interactive | “They didn’t make it interactive, like it was more like them telling us about the lesson.” |
| | Social | “I like to do short assignments ... that I can talk to my classmates about, even talk to the teachers about.” |

| | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|--|
| | Student-Centric | “And it was a topic of something of our choice and not something that was necessarily given to us.” |
| | Traditional Pacing | “It was a little had to understand sometimes, some lessons, because they move so fast.” |
| <u>Make It Make Sense</u> | Real-World Application | “How do I take these skills that I learn here and then apply it to the real-world?” |
| | Cultural Relevance | “I think they need to restructure the curriculum system, make it a little more updated so that it’s more relatable.” |
| | Incentive Learning | “Somebody get a incentive for something school will go a lot better.” |

Teachers Matter Most

Kendra recognized her most effective teacher had “so much energy, that really made the class interesting. So, it was like, I think her having that much energy and really interacting with us made the class.” Conversely, Jewel shared a different recollection. “I had teachers that I didn’t really connect with.” Tonya expressed her concern about teachers’ ability to understand the students that they are charged to teach. “Teachers should be more familiar with that specific, not area, [but] environment, so they understand why certain students can’t focus.”

Pedagogy

Participants preferred more interactive and project-based learning experiences as opposed to more traditional forms of instruction. Leslie described traditional teaching and learning as

“maybe a little dry. You’re not going to really want to learn from them because it’s going to be boring.” Ahmad affirmed this thinking when he stated, “[Teachers have] got to find creative ways. [He] really don’t like the cut and dry approach.” All participants identified some project-based learning experience that they enjoyed doing. In addition, students prefer to have opportunities to interact with others during the learning process. Kendra concluded, “[Teachers] didn’t make it interactive,... it was more like them tell us about the lesson. [She] like[s] to do short assignments ... that [she] can talk to my classmates about, even talk to the teacher about.” Participants also reported the significance of student-centric learning, whereby students have voice in the content and demonstration of skill mastery. Selah believes “they should allow students to... do what works best for them. Like I said, some people are like visual learners ... teachers in general need to be more understanding as to how an individual is able to learn and retain information.”

Make It Make Sense

Participants want the type of education and instruction that is going to be meaningful throughout their lives in the world they find themselves in. Tonya said that she was most interested in “learning skills that could make [her] good money in the real-world.” Ahmad asked, “How do I take these skills that I learn here [in school] and then apply it to the real-world?” Participants also discussed the need for more relevant courses and content. Tonya reported, “they need to restructure the curriculum system, make it a little more updated so that it’s more relatable.” More than one student suggested that learning be designed to motivate towards achievement and engage students in instruction. According to Jaleel if “[students] get an incentive...school will go a lot better.”

Relationships

The collected data reveals that relationships matter in terms of student engagement for all participants. Relationships with peers, families, teachers, and other individuals can play either a supportive or discouraging role. Maleek put it this way, “No help. It’s like [students were] just out here. By [themselves]. So what’s the point ... ?” Sonya and Tonya identified relationships with peers as being significant, while Kendra recognized the role of the teacher–student relationship. All types of positive and supportive relationships were considered to be important for positive student engagement.

Table 5

Relationships: Sub-Themes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes

| Sub-Themes | Codes | In Vivo Quotes |
|-------------------------|--------------|--|
| <u>Peers</u> | Supporters | “Me and my friends has the same goals, so we all was really pressed to go to school.” |
| | Distractors | “It just seemed like they wasn’t there to learn ... so it made it hard.” |
| <u>Family</u> | Champions | “I felt like my ... I knew my mom had my back and I knew that my mom supported me.” |
| | Challenges | “... things that was missing for me was like a better parenting.” |
| <u>Teachers</u> | Encouragers | “You’re actually showing us that you care and not just doing it only because it’s your job.” |
| | Discouragers | “... some teachers come to school for just a paycheck.” |
| <u>Other Supporters</u> | Counselors | “I say just have like a lot more, like personal counseling.” |

Influencers “We just need more positive influences.”

Coaches “He seen something in me like, that nobody had seen.”

Peers

All research participants discussed the role their friends or classmates had on their individual levels of engagement. Many participants recalled the positive impacts of their peer relationships. Faith affirmed these relationships. “I had a great group of friends that accepted me for who I was and who I am. And it kind of made high school better and made high school go well.” When speaking of her friends, Sonya acknowledged that:

[they] just made it a little bit easier for [her] to deal with [her] home life. When [she] was with them they made sure that [she] stayed laughing and [she] stayed happy...they never really let [her] recede into [herself]. So, it made it easier.

Conversely, Leslie recalls her peers simply being a “distraction, of course,” while Maleek revealed that his friends felt a lot like him, that school was “a waste of time” and “that’s why [they] were skipping together.”

Family

Participants discussed either champions who supported their engagement in school, or the cause of some of the engagement challenges that they faced. Jewel and Faith spoke of their parents as champions for their engagement. Jewel celebrated her parents when she reported, “[she] always had [her] family with [her] and they always pushed [her] to never give up. Don’t back down. And keep pushing forward.” Faith said, “[she] knew [her] mom had [her] back and [she] knew that [her] mom supported [her].” However, not all parents were supportive in the same way. Selah confessed, “[her] family is kind of strict when it comes to school. So, they were really big on school.” Some participants, like Denzel, regret not having families who were more

involved in their education. He reported, “things that was missing for [him] was better parenting. Still, Leslie had yet another novel perspective of her family’s role in her engagement when she said that they had little to no impact on her education, whether positive or negative: “family and school was two different lives to [her].”

Teachers

For the study participants, teachers came in two forms—the supportive and the discouraging varieties. According to Maleek, a supportive teacher is one who is “actually showing [students] that [they] care and not just doing it only because it’s your job, but actually putting the passion in to it.” Kendra believes “teachers should really care more about the student than the lesson, although it’s school.” Discouraging relationships with teachers can lead to poor academic outcomes. According to Sonya, “[students] aren’t going to feel comfortable coming to [a teacher], asking [them] for help if they know [teachers] going to respond negatively.” Faith pointed out that teachers who “don’t speak to students or give them the same respect that they demand” create relational issues for their students. For Jewel, teachers with more rigid instructional styles and personalities were problematic for her engagement. “For those teachers that [she] did not connect with on like a relationship level, or did not fully trust them, it was due to their teaching methods and also how they formed connections.”

Other Supporters

Participants acknowledged the need for other supportive adults to maximize their school engagement. Denzel, when speaking about his football coach said, “[he] had so much hope for [him]...like he [saw] something in me that nobody had seen. [His] coach definitely had faith in [him].” Ahmad noted, “[students] just need more encouragement ...[students] need more positive influences. [He said] just have like a lot more, like personal counseling.” Kendra

recognized the need for “somebody else outside of [their] teachers that [students] can go and talk to. Like, if [they’re] feeling down.”

School-Related Experiences

Research study participants identified several non-instructional factors that supported or thwarted their levels of engagement while attending urban public schools. These factors included both tangible resources and intangible school features, as well as the role of extracurriculars that foster engagement; Faith recognized “better accommodations, better support, the resources and the physical materials that [students] need and a good sense of a community, a better environment” as some such factors.

Table 6

School-Related Experiences: Sub-Themes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes

| Sub-Themes | Codes | In Vivo Quotes |
|--------------------|---------------------|---|
| <u>Intangibles</u> | Community | “That was in a bad neighborhood because it was always something around there, shootings, somebody selling drugs.” |
| | Scheduling | “I feel like the school day, for one, is too long.” |
| | Misbehavior | “... first thing, in the hallways. The hallways...That’s the one thing you going to do is run the hallways.” |
| | Climate and Culture | “I felt like they didn’t care, they wouldn’t be there for us.” |

| | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|---|
| | Safety | “... in my school people was able to bring guns and weapons and all that type of stuff, so it wasn't a safe environment.” |
| | Transportation | “If I had like a reliable source of transportation, that would have been better for my education.” |
| <u>Tangibles</u> | Facilities | “Air conditioning. AC ... even like heating and stuff.” |
| | Resources | “Make sure we had, they have, the supplies that they need because that was a huge problem.” |
| | Food | “Yeah, better food would have been definitely better.” |
| <u>Extracurriculars</u> | Programs | “So, it was the programs that really pushed me.” |
| | Sports | “The only thing was sports because we play sports, that’s it.” |

Intangibles

Participants conveyed several intangibles that can scaffold student engagement. One such intangible that participants felt should be modified is the traditional school-day schedule.

Kendra believes “drop periods, where [students] can, like, rest and take [their] time to get like, get [themselves] together throughout the day” would be beneficial to overall student engagement. Bianca stated “hope[s] the school week gets shorter or the school days get shorter. Honestly, truly it’s just not productive to be in that school day, in that one building for so long.”

Study participants also have the concern of safety in schools. Many echoed Bianca’s thinking and believe “they could start by creating a safe space.” Selah recommended “security on

the inside and the outside” as a good idea. Jaleel emphasized the importance of school community safety: “That was a bad neighborhood because it was always something around there, shootings, somebody selling drugs. It’s always something right there.”

Transportation, or the lack thereof, emerged as a concern for many study participants. Selah recalled catching “two buses and a light rail to get back and forth to school. [She] feel[s] like if [she] had like a reliable source of transportation, that would have been better for [her] education.” Bianca’s account was similar. “The only way for [her] to get to school was to catch...three buses, in which case [she’d] have to be on [her] first bus at around 5:00 a.m.” Sometimes the intangibles that the participants disclosed were simply feelings. Denzel expressed it by saying he “felt like they didn’t care, [educators] wouldn’t be there for [students].”

Tangibles

By and large, participants believed that their schools were lacking in their physical resources. According to Denzel, schools should provide students with “new books, not even new books, just like sometimes like the old books ... better like surroundings and updated things that make a kid want to go to school.” Jewel summed it up by saying, “things that you see teachers in like stores purchasing with their own physical money instead of school money.” Faith spoke about the ergonomics of the furniture when she stated, “a student needs to be sitting in a classroom where they’re not sitting in a regular hard chair that hasn’t changed over the years. Let’s give them a better environment where they can actually do the work.” Many participants also suggested that schools improve what they are feeding students. Sonya remembered that “the food sucked. That stuff that they [were] giving [students] was slop.”

Role of Extracurriculars

Participants affirmed the role extracurricular activities played in their overall level of student engagement. Selah said that her involvement in extracurricular activities was beneficial because she was able to “network and get to know like different people and the teachers better. So, it kind of helped [her] out.” Sonya stated, “Outside of [her] after-school programs and my English class, [she] really didn’t like [school]. Faith thinks that if there were “a little bit more things that more students would want to do or [were of] interest to all students, [she] probably would have [done] more.” Maleek, when asked about his motivation for school, responded honestly, “only thing was sports because we play sports, that’s it.”

Non-School-Related Factors

Participants of this study reported factors that contributed to or undermined student engagement that were not school-related. They talked about personal hardships and issues in the community that are relevant factors impacting engagement. Denzel searched for the most accurate words and finally landed on, “And some people um, some people got it hard. And people don’t understand what getting it hard mean, but they didn’t choose that route.” Jewel listed the following as non-school-related experiences that impact student engagement: “Harsh socio-economic circumstances, i.e., housing, finances, food, and wellbeing. Undiagnosed and or untreated mental issues, drugs and significant life changes—pregnancy, homelessness, violence in the home or surrounding area.” Jaleel summed it up by saying sometimes it’s just “too much on you.”

Table 7

Non-School-Related Factors: Sub-Themes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes

| Sub-Themes | Codes | In Vivo Quotes |
|------------|-------|----------------|
|------------|-------|----------------|

| | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|---|
| <u>Hardships</u> | Home Life | “Some people are kind of like forced to drop out when you’re in that situation.” |
| | Economic Challenges | “And then he goes back home and he looks at his situation or she looks at that situation and they think, like, ‘Oh, well, I need to start making some money’ ...” |
| | Teenage Pregnancy | “So, it’s a stressful situation, like kids with babies. They can’t go to school without nobody watching their baby.” |
| <u>The Community</u> | Chaos | “the area it was in was a lot of dope fiends. A lot of addicts, a lot of drugs being used around there. A lot of guns, a lot of fighting and it was just there.” |
| | Drugs | “... so, they seen the drug dealers outside, of course, getting quick money. So, they felt like, what did they need to come to school for.” |
| | Violence | “When we would leave school we had to be in like a group ... they were attacking people ... either being robbed, jumped, shot at, it was just chaos.” |

Hardships

Participants spoke about hardships that reduce a student’s motivation to engage in school and school-related activities. Ahmad recognized that a student’s homelife can determine the level of engagement they exhibit. Selah recognized that because of their turbulent homelife, “some

people are kind of forced to drop out when you're in [those] situation[s]." Other participants pointed to economic hardships as a leading cause for reduced student engagement among urban students. Ahmad said students leave school and go "back home and he looks at a situation ... and they think 'Oh, well, I need to start making money' ... and education is not on their mind at that point." Additionally, according to participants, teenage pregnancy is a common hardship that befalls young mothers and fathers alike. Jaleel remarked "having a child ... you got to worry about school or about your child... when you can go hit the block and have money for your kids So, it's a stressful situation."

Larger Community Concerns

Participants perceived the chaotic nature of community violence and illegal activities as having played a role in the level of engagement inside of the classroom. Tonya explained how many of her classmates became less engaged in school after navigating "drug deals outside, of course, getting quick money. So, they felt like, what did they need to come to school for." Sonya described the violence she experienced on her commute to school this way:

we were being robbed, jumped, shot at, it was just chaos. If [a student] got into a fight on the way to school, by the time [they] got to school [they] wasn't worried about doing no schoolwork because you so amped up off whatever situation just transpired.

Tonya asked, "Is ghetto an appropriate word to use?" She went on to say the environment was "very ghetto. It was bad."

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This research study examined the

engagement experiences of these former students via one central research question and three sub-questions. The central research question revealed participants' overall engagement experiences, while the sub-questions delved into the specific domains of engagement.

Central Research Question

What were the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban, public high schools? The theme of engagement experiences addresses this foundational question. Participants attributed their engagement experiences to both school-related and non-school-related factors. Some participants simply loved school and learning and found support from nurturing parents and home lives. Other participants were escaping turbulent lives at home and viewed school as a place of support or simply as a means to a meal. The participants acknowledged that these engagement experiences are not fixed (Degroote et al., 2019; Mosher & Mac Gowan, 1985), and can be augmented in either direction by school culture and academic programming. However, more than other factors, both positive and negative education-related relationships impacted students' engagement experiences, thus revealing the role of the relationship theme on student engagement experiences.

Most participants acknowledged initially having, or desiring to have, elevated levels of engagement. Selah attributed her declining engagement to what is commonly known as 'senioritis.' "Initially, freshmen through like junior year..., [she] would spend like hours doing homework. Once [she] went to senior year, [she] started to slack." Although Maleek and Ahmad pointed to entirely different causes for their diminishing engagement experiences. Maleek said, "At first [he] was trying to learn, but then once [he] started getting older, it was like [he was] not seeing no progress for real. [He was] just [t]here." Ahmad recalled his diminishing engagement this way, "in the beginning, [he] put in a lot [of effort] ... but then ... [he] wasn't invested in

school as much as [he] was in the beginning.” Others, like Kendra, had the opposite experience. “When [she] first started, [she] would say [she] didn’t put a lot of effort in because ... [she] was still trying to get adjusted. But then [in her] 11th and 12th grade year [she] put in a lot of effort.” Some participants, like Bianca and Tonya, maintained elevated levels of engagement throughout school. Bianca said she put in “110%” effort. Tonya said she put in “a lot [of effort]. [She] had in mind that [she] wanted to go to college, so [she] wanted to make sure [her] grades and stuff [were] good.”

Participants’ reasons for engaging varied. Some were motivated by extrinsic factors. When asked his primary reason for engaging in school, Maleek responded, “sports” and that “[his] mom forced [him] to.” Other participants confirmed that a major source of their engagement was to meet parental expectations. Jaleel said he engaged in school, “for [his] parents.” Leslie said, “[she] had to.” Selah simply said that she “wanted to make [her] parents proud.” Sonya went a step further and said she thought by doing well in school it would “make my grandmother love [her] more.”

Others engaged to achieve some goal beyond high school. These integrated motivations towards goals included attending college or trade school or acquiring employment. Tonya said she engaged for her “trade and to attend college.” Ahmad’s sole purpose for engaging was “to get a great education so [he] could have a nice job.” Kendra reported she engaged simply to “get good grades and graduate.”

Yet, some participants were motivated to engage for purely intrinsic reasons. Faith said, “[She] wanted to learn. [She] wanted to be challenged. [She] loved school and wanted to be challenged. [She] wanted to go to college, [she] had an urge to learn.” Jewel said her purpose was “pursuing excellence ... feeling a sense of accomplishment, purpose, and pride in [her]self.”

Participants described instances of personal engagement and what engagement looked like in their classmates. The word ‘focused’ was mentioned a substantial number of times across all data collection methods. Denzel described an engaged student this way: “They focus on what they do. They love what they do. Come to school every day. Every day! Not missing a day.” Jaleel describes engagement similarly. “It’s somebody focused. Who got their eyes on the teacher, not saying nothing and a pencil and paper ready to take notes.” Selah said that she was engaged when she is able to “zone everything out... like, really focused on thought and deep thought.” She went on to say that engagement leads to productivity and the ability to “get a lot done.” Maleek said that engagement is achieved when there are “no distractions. [Students are] actually trying to do their work, asking for help.” Ahmad said, “extremely focused” and “dedicated to learning.”

Student engagement experiences are malleable and can traverse the entire continuum of student engagement over the course of a student’s academic tenure. All domains of student engagement have a direct correlation to the ways in which psychological needs are met or neglected, dictating a students’ level of engagement. The engagement experiences theme is largely revealed through the central research question.

Sub-Question One

What instructional experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement? The theme of instructional considerations suggests participants wanted classes and assignments to be meaningful (Freire, 2000; Kunjufu, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sims, 2016). Selah requested that assignments “be logical and not busy work ... make it feel like ... there’s a purpose behind it.” Instruction should also be real-world applicable. Maleek believes, “It’s a lot of stuff they teach [students], but after school it be[comes] useless.” Bianca

reported experiencing positive student engagement when she found her instructional experiences to be culturally relevant “because you’re talking about people who look like you, like you’re studying yourself.” Other participants were interested in instructional considerations that would provide opportunities beyond high school graduation. Some participants failed to see how the instruction that was taking place in their classrooms would be of use or benefit to them in the ‘real world.’

From a pedagogical perspective, participants would have preferred instructional considerations made that transcends the traditional (Sims, 2016; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Tonya addressed the significance of student-centered lessons when recalling her most engaging instructional experiences. “It was more so personal. And it was a topic of something of our choice and not something that was necessarily given to us.” Kendra favored more interactive methods of teaching and learning. She said, “anything that’s going to make [her] actually speak out and get excited about the lesson, those are the types of lessons [she] like[s].” Where Kendra preferred auditory learning strategies, Sonya considered the importance of kinesthetics in the classroom: “Hands on activities. Getting [students] out of just reading the textbook...different activities where [students] can create and do things.” Leslie echoed these sentiments when reflecting on her most engaging instructional experiences: “Projects, those were, of course, what mostly attracted [her]... times where [she] enjoyed class the most [was] when we were doing projects.”

Sub-Question Two

What interpersonal experiences did African Americans attribute to student engagement? Participants’ interpersonal experiences related to student engagement were multifaceted and comprised of supportive and meaningful relationships with teachers, school leadership, coaches,

counselors, mentors, peers, and family members (Fang et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). The interpersonal experiences participants had enveloped the themes of engagement experiences, relationships, and non-school-related facts. Although all these relationships work collectively to nourish student engagement, the two most significant relationships are those students have with their teachers and those they have with their peers. Kendra acknowledged the general role of interpersonal supports to student engagement when she reported, “having a support system really has a big part in it.” She also revealed that for her, her “friends played a big part because, like, they were kind of our support system.” Tonya echoed those sentiments and “I think[s] [her] peers probably played a bigger part than [her] family because they understood [school] more.”

Faith highlighted the importance of the teacher–student relationship when recounting her experiences with teachers. “[She] like[d] the teachers that knew their stuff, that knew how to relate to the kids. That could be funny with it. Be funny, joking, a sense of home, a sense of warmth, comfortability.” Tonya expressed how some experiences with teachers were frustrating, to say the least. “A lot of [her] teachers didn’t go to public schools or wasn’t from that type of environment, so they didn’t really relate to the students.”

Study participants universally agreed that parents and families have a significant role in a students’ engagement. Jewel praised her mother for “inculcat[ing] within [her], not only the ability to learn but the want to learn and the excitement to learn,” while Maleek put it another way: “[his] mother, she made [him] go. That’s the only reason [he] got my high school diploma because of her.” All participants agreed with Selah when she said, “if [students] don’t have that support system or that structure then [they are] going to drift off and [they are] going to do other stuff.”

Regardless of their multifaceted motives for attending school, participants expected school and their teachers to support, understand, and respect them. Participants also expressed the importance of having the encouragement and support of their families. Positive school-related interpersonal experiences were critical to the participants' student engagement experiences. Positive and supportive interpersonal relationships directly influence student engagement across all domains.

Sub-Question Three

What environmental experiences did African Americans attribute to their student engagement experiences? The themes of school-related experiences and non-school-related factors address this research question. Participants discussed three significant environments that supported or thwarted their engagement experiences: the classroom, the school, and the community (Saeed & Zyniger, 2012). In the classroom environment, Sonya said that engagement is nurtured in "a more understanding atmosphere. Judge-free atmosphere. Because if [students] don't understand but [they are] in an atmosphere where [they] feel like [they are] going to be picked on or judged, [they are] too afraid to even say, [they] don't understand." Jewel pointed out that teachers are critical to creating this type of learning environment when she reported, "she like[s] when there was that sense of, or the teachers fostered that sense of like community in the classroom."

The climate and culture of the school environment can prove to determine a student's level of engagement. Bianca recalled not "want[ing] to engage because [her] classmates were so rowdy, and nobody would ever calm them down." Tonya said that her engagement suffered because she did not feel safe inside of her school. "In [her] school people [were] able to bring guns and weapons and all that type of stuff, so it wasn't a safe environment."

The community at large also affected students' ability to engage inside of the school during the school day. Jewel and Kendra both spoke about the role of their school's neighborhood, albeit from two quite different perspectives. Jewel described her school as being in a "very nice neighborhood. Yeah, there was a great diversity of people. They were like cute little bookstores on the corner and the [central library was] right down the street. So, it's a very artsy area." By contrast, Kendra recalled her school's neighborhood this way: "That seriously had an impact. [She would not] say in the heart of the city, but [they] were right touching the city and there's a lot of shootings going on, a lot of ghetto stuff." Sonya, who attended multiple schools in ACPS, recognized the differences as well. At one school, she noted, "[students] couldn't even leave out of the school by ourselves," while another "was more calm ... [students] can actually stand outside on the bus stop and not have to worry about nobody doing [anything] to you."

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This chapter first provided a description of the twelve research participants. Each participant completed a qualitative questionnaire, a focus group session with two other participants, and a one-on-one semi-structured interview. Next, the chapter identified the five essential themes derived through imaginative variation as: Engagement Experiences, Instructional Considerations, Relationships, School-Related Experiences, and Non-School Related Factors. The central research question and three research sub-questions were answered by way of the triangulated data collected from the twelve research participants.

Though participants' student engagement levels varied widely, the research revealed several experiences that impact overall student engagement in both positive and negative directions. One of the most significant factors that supported or thwarted student engagement was how the participants perceived their teachers, how their teachers taught, and what their teachers taught. Moreover, participants more often discussed how their teachers made them feel, as opposed to the lessons' content and teacher methods. Participants emphasized the importance of the teacher–student relationship, they also found that resources, both human and physical, were insufficient to maximize student engagement levels. Lastly, their experiences with family and the greater community, to some degree or another, all played significant roles in the participants' school engagement.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Chapter One introduced the historical, social, and theoretical background associated with the phenomenon of student engagement. Chapter Two provided an in-depth review of the existing literature pertaining to self-determination theory and the student engagement phenomenon. The second chapter also provided an overview of the African American experience with education in America. Chapter Three provided the research methodology that was utilized to conduct this research study. Chapter Four provided descriptions of the twelve research participants, explanations of essential themes, and the resulting responses to the research's central question and sub-questions. Chapter Five interprets the research results, presents findings and articulates the implications of these findings as they relate to educational policies and practices. The theoretical and empirical implications at the intersection of self-determination theory and student engagement are discussed. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations and delimitations of this study and offers recommendations for future research studies.

Discussion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The study's findings, when interpreted, amplify these experiences and reveal implications for educational policies and practices supporting and thwarting urban-educated, African American students' engagement

experiences in a public school district. As a theory, self-determination is an effective framework for understanding human motivation towards specific behaviors and lends itself to the domains of student engagement, as studied empirically. The delimitations of this study are bound by the demographics and context of the study. Many of the limitations were attributed to pandemic-related issues. This study makes evident the need for additional research related to student engagement, in general, and engagement for African Americans and urban educated students specifically.

Interpretation of Findings

Data was collected using qualitative questionnaires, a series of focus groups, and semi-structured interviews, and it was then analyzed using van Manen's (1990) approach to hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation. After the coding of significant statements, sub-themes emerged and those sub-themes were hermeneutically refined into the essential themes of this study: Engagement Experiences, Instructional Considerations, Relationships, School-Related Experiences, and Non-School-Related Factors. The themes, research-question responses, participants' statements, my positionality as the researcher, the theoretical framework, my philosophical assumptions, and empirical inquiry are collectively interpreted to construct meaning and prescribe change.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Students do not simply engage or disengage from school. The student engagement experiences of African Americans attending urban public schools are predicated on the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci et al., 2017; Guo, 2018; Kurt & Tas, 2018; Sims, 2016). These engagement experiences are not singular—nor are they static (Degroote et al., 2019; Mosher & Mac Gowan, 1985). There are reasons, causes, and triggers

that lead to varying levels of student engagement. Extrinsicly, student engagement is governed by teachers, grades, school culture, building and community conditions, academic content and pedagogical practices, and academic resources, as well as other school-related and non-school-related factors (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wijsman et al., 2018). Student engagement experiences are nurtured or neglected within the contexts, conditions, and relationships afforded to students (Cornel et al., 2016; Durkesen et al., 2017; Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018; Reeve, 2012). Although African American students have varying motives for their engagement, they do want to engage. However, students will withdraw and disengage when their psychological needs are frustrated or denied. Maleek said in his interview that he “like[s] learning new stuff,” although he “was never at school.” When asked why he did not go to school, he simply responded, “because it was a waste of time.” African American students require relevant content that is not perceived to be a waste of their time. That content must be presented in interesting ways that allow students to be seen and heard and to express themselves (Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Sims, 2016). For African American students, relationships matter most (Fang et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). A sense of belonging and connectedness can motivate African American students to engage at high levels, regardless of the circumstances and conditions that envelop their educational experiences. Sonya recalled she “met a lot of people in high school that really helped [her] make it through [because her] home situation wasn’t great.” Sonya’s statement also brings to light that while some factors impacting student engagement are school-related, others are not (Elsaesser et al., 2016; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Orrock & Clark, 2015). If student achievement is the goal, then education must be approached holistically. If one domain of student engagement becomes compromised, it renders students vulnerable to amotivation and disengagement across all school experiences and domains of engagement.

Student Engagement is Malleable

Student engagement is not fixed but fluid and malleable, influenced by both autonomous and controlled motivational factors (Degroote et al., 2019; Fernandez-Suarez et al., 2016; Mosher & Mac Gowan, 1985; Orrock & Clark, 2015). For students, autonomous forms of motivation stem from how they have internalized school in general, and how well schools meet their educational desires and expectations (Deci et al., 2017; Guo, 2018; Kurt & Tas, 2018; Willem et al., 2017). When students believe that their schools consider them and their short- and long-term needs, they are more likely to engage at elevated levels. Ahmad, who confessed to “hating school,” said that his engagement increased when, through interesting, hands-on instruction with a positive teacher, he “[saw] a path to [his] future.” The dynamics of the teacher–student relationship and the relevance of content and instruction served to nourish the engagement of a student who had previously experienced diminished engagement.

Unfortunately, students often feel like Tonya, who “felt like [her education] was just to get city kids to say they got their high school diploma. [She does not] think they necessarily cared whether they were educating [students].” When students feel this way, it is difficult for them to engage because schools are not meeting their needs and expectations. A student’s sense of relatedness is damaged and affective engagement decreases when they do not believe school ‘cares’ about them (Durkesen et al., 2017; Pascoe, 2016). Maleek remembered there being “no help. It [was] like [he was] just out there by [himself]. So, what’s the point of going to school if you’re not getting no help.” Maleek concludes that “basically, they force [African American students] out in the streets.” This notion of negligence is manifested in the physical conditions of school buildings, the instructional content, teacher dispositions, lack of resources, and a host of other educational factors. Denzel expressed a diminished sense of engagement by saying, “[he]

felt like [teachers] didn't care, they wouldn't be there for [students]." The perception is that the educational organization does not value them as students, and quite possibly as people. This belief makes it easy for students prescribe to this thinking to disengage from school and school-related activities (Carrabba & Farmer, 2018; Durkesen et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Orrock & Clark, 2015). Intrinsic motivation and all forms of student engagement wane when students believe they are undervalued, unappreciated and underserved.

The sources of motivation that promote and undermine student engagement are not undifferentiated, but universal (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Saeed & Zyniger, 2012). As an example, teachers serve to directly shape students' levels of affective and cognitive engagements and similarly nurture or neglect students' basic psychological needs. Ahmad reported how his motivation towards school changed after feeling unsupported by teachers. "[He] just fell back and then all [his] grades just turned mediocre because [he] wasn't invested in school as much as [he] was in the beginning." Although initially highly engaged, Ahmad's psychological need for relatedness was left unsupported by the dynamics of his student-teacher interpersonal relationships. By contrast, when students build positive relationships with their teachers, they not only relate better to them, but also to the academic content taught by those teachers, regardless of the content area (Sims, 2016; Montenegro, 2017). Kendra said, "[her teacher] had a positive impact on [her]" when discussing how her favorite teacher was able to push her to a greater level of classroom engagement. When teachers are warm, welcoming, fair, up-beat, competent, passionate, and culturally astute, their students will have positive engagement experiences (Geraci et al., 2017). These positive student engagement experiences satisfy an individual students' basic psychological needs and in turn raise student engagement across all domains. On the other hand, when teachers are rigid, inconsiderate, solely focused on academics, and

culturally insensitive, their students' psychological need for relatedness is left unnurtured and their engagement experiences are negatively impacted (Konold et al., 2017; Kunjufu, 2002).

Relevance Is Required

Students need to know to what ends they are engaging academically. Bianca believes “people [are] more likely to engage because they see they’re getting something out of it.” Students want to know that the skills they are learning will be beneficial to them throughout their lives (Fredericks et al., 2019; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Sims 2016). When reflecting on the relevance of courses and course work, Maleek stated, “It’s a lot of stuff they teach [students], but after school it be[comes] useless.” Students, like Leslie, have found that the education they acquired is of little benefit to them in their lives past high school. Leslie concluded, “[her high school education] hasn’t done that much for [her] because ... [she] didn’t go to college, so [she] didn’t really have to carry most of that stuff with [her].” Both content and pedagogy can work to thwart motivation towards student engagement (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Geraci et al., 2017; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Sonya recalled that she “could have put a lot more effort into [learning, but] ... they didn’t make school interesting. It was boring. [She doesn’t] really feel like they taught [students] all that they could have.”

Just as student engagement can be thwarted by academic content and pedagogical practices, student engagement can also be nourished and cultivated by academic content and pedagogical practices (Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Students want to know that the skills they are learning will translate to better employment opportunities. Students who disengage and leave school prior to graduation often do so to earn money. Although misguided in their thinking, they have rationalized that completing their education will not afford them greater employment opportunities. Tonya said that she was most interested in “learning

skills that could make [her] good money in the real world.” Ahmad asked, “How do I take these skills that I learn here [in school] and then apply it to the real world?” From an intrinsic perspective, participants acknowledged that personal interest, relevance of course, and type of assignments had an impact on their levels of engagement.

Not only do students desire input in what they learn, but also in how they learn and how they demonstrate that learning. When students are provided with a greater level of autonomy, they also assume a greater level of ownership, which has a direct connection to their academic motivation and satisfaction (Cornell et al., 2016; Montenegro, 2017; Shernoff et al., 2003). Selah believes “[educators] should allow students to ... do what works best for them ... teachers in general need to be more understanding as to how an individual is able to learn and retain information.” Student-centric approaches to teaching and learning, where students have a voice in content and demonstration of skill mastery, are essential for high levels of student engagement and autonomous motivation (Dary et al., 2016; Fredericks et al., 2019). Ahmad affirmed this notion when he stated, “they got to find creative ways. [Students] really don’t like the cut and dry approach.”

African American students desire hands-on and collaborative instruction (Carrabba & Farmer, 2018; Dary et al. 2016; Lee & Hannafin, 2016). Each participant, at various data collection points, identified a hands-on, project-based learning experience that they enjoyed and found themselves engaged in. Leslie commented, “hands-on projects, those were of course, the more attractive because I’m a hands-on person.” Project-based learning provides opportunities for students to foster relatedness, build competence, and demonstrate autonomy while allowing them to interact with their peers and teachers.

Students want to understand the significance of what they are being taught. They want to know the purpose and usefulness of what they are being asked to learn. Mandatory, high-stakes exams do not matter to students. Rather, they want to know how what they are learning will serve them beyond the doors of the school. When students have a personal interest in a course or subject matter, they naturally engage more readily. Connecting personal interest to content makes learning personally relevant, thus engagement occurs more authentically. Effective educators build genuine rapport with their students and deliver course content through those interpersonal connections and sensibilities.

Resources Do Indeed Matter

Resources matter in soliciting optimal student engagement for urban, African American students (Bradley, 2010; Caldas & Bankston, 2007; Fredericks et al., 2019; Sims, 2016). Students are acutely aware of the value inferences of meager or inadequate resources. Bianca recalled that making “resources available to help students” would be the primary change she would have made to her educational experiences. Academic, human, physical, and auxiliary resources need to be better leveraged for students to maximize their engagement potential. The availability and condition of academic resources (i.e., books, learning materials, computers) has an impact on affective and cognitive engagement (Geraci et al., 2017; Saeed & Zyniger, 2012) as well as on a student’s ability to satisfy the need for competence, which is essential for skill mastery (Fang et al., 2018). Human resources (i.e., well-trained and sufficient teachers, support staff) also have a critical role in the engagement experiences of students. Students’ needs are met through interpersonal relationships that support relatedness and affective engagement. Students want more supportive and caring adults in their school settings (Rivera 2019; Verkuyten et al., 2019). Physical resources (i.e., quality of school buildings and furnishings), or the lack thereof,

impact students' engagement experiences across all domains (Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018; Reeve, 2012). Faith spoke about the physical resources when she stated "a student needs to be sitting in a classroom where they're not sitting in a regular hard chair that hasn't changed over the years. Let's give [students] a better environment where they can actually do the work." Lastly, auxiliary resources (i.e., reliable internet service, quality meals, extracurricular programming, transportation) contribute to a student's motivation, behavior, relatedness, competence, and all forms of school engagement. As an example, the participants suggested that schools improve what they are feeding students. Sonya remembered that "the food sucked. That stuff that they [gave] us was slop." Additionally, Maleek said his level of student engagement was largely influenced by the auxiliary resources he found at school.

Resources matter to student engagement and motivation. A lack of resources negatively impacts students when they are expected to take inconvenient commutes, through chaotic and violent neighborhoods, enter into rundown school buildings which have inadequate heating and cooling, no potable water, and barely edible food, to be taught irrelevant content in boring ways by teachers with low cultural acumen and who are perceived to teach simply to collect a paycheck. It is unconscionable to expect students to engage in learning when those tasked with this duty have shown a depraved indifference to the process. It must be understood that a student's sense of pride and self-identity are inextricably connected to and negatively impacted by subpar school resources. One should not be so naïve as to believe that resources alone will solve all issues related to student engagement; however, adequate resources do indicate a commitment to those individuals who stand to benefit from those resources.

Social Capital

Student engagement can be promoted through a positive school culture and a sense of community. Relationships with peers, families, teachers, and other individuals can either support or discourage student engagement (Bemepchat & Shernoff, 2012; Fredericks et al., 2019). When students feel supported, safe, equipped, and empowered to be authentic and vulnerable, they are free to engage. Social capital is a network of relationships and connections that fosters trust, norms, and cooperation, and it yields mutual benefits for those who pursue it (Khan et al., 2018). This network is built by teachers, peers, families, other supportive adults, and the community at large and positively contributes to student engagement experiences and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs.

Teachers are the most significant extrinsic factor in student engagement experiences (Digamon & Cinches, 2017). From the perspective of school and education, teachers are the linchpins of students' social capital network. Jewel found that "for those teachers that [she] did not connect with on a relationship level, or did not fully trust them, it was due to ... how they formed connections." The number of touchpoints with teachers and the academic significance of those interactions makes the student-teacher relationship the most critical for engagement, motivation, and psychological-needs satisfaction. Discouraging relationships with teachers can lead to poor academic outcomes. According to Sonya, "[students] aren't going to feel comfortable [going] to [teachers], asking [them] for help if they know [teachers are] going to respond negatively." This is contrary to the notion of social capital, which seeks partnerships and relies on trust and cooperation. Faith recalled teachers who "[didn't] give [students] the same respect that they demand," which creates relational issues for their students and weakens their ability to self-determine and achieve. Rigid instructional styles and personalities are problematic

for student engagement, especially for African American students, as they reduce student autonomy (Konold et al., 2017; Kunjufu, 2002; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Conversely, a supportive teacher is one who “actually show[s] [students] that [they] care and not just doing it only because it’s [their] job, but actually put the passion in to it,” according to Maleek. Teachers must create an environment of camaraderie in the classroom and develop authentic, positive relationships with each of their students to create an effective learning community that contributes to a student’s social capital network.

Families play a vital role in developing social capital for African American students (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012; Same et al., 2018). Families are the source of integrated motivation towards student engagement, as the value placed on education and school by the family at home is quite often adopted by the student. Jewel championed her parents for “inculcat[ing] in [her] a love of learning.” Faith was confident that her parents “had [her] back and [she] knew that [she was] supported.” Parents and families play a vital role in the social capital network by setting academic expectations and serving as advocates for their students.

Not all parents were supportive in the same way. Families sometimes rely too heavily upon controlled forms of motivation to ensure their students engage. Selah confessed, “my family is kind of strict when it comes to school.” Jaleel’s mother informed him that “if [he didn’t] go to school, [he would have] to get the f!@# out of [her] house.” These methods of motivation do not work to strengthen social capital, but rather dampens autonomous forms of motivation and focus on negative-consequence avoidance (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Still, some families contributed little to none of the social capital needed for their students to reach maximum student engagement. Leslie held the perspective that her family had neither a positive

nor a negative impact on her engagement experiences because, for her, “family and school was two different lives” and the two rarely, if ever, converged.

Peer associations play a significant role in the development of social capital that promotes student engagement (Fredericks et al., 2019). Peer relationships can have positive impacts on student engagement and relatedness, as those relationships work to augment other interpersonal relationships that may prove challenging (Geraci et al., 2017; Pascoe, 2016). Sonya acknowledged that her peers, “made it a little bit easier for [her] to deal with [her] home life ... they made sure that [she] stayed laughing and [she] stayed happy. So, [they] made it easier.” These positive peer relationships serve to increase affective engagement and foster greater notions of relatedness. Social capital amongst peers can also work to increase cognitive engagement. Students often associate with others who have similar academic goals. Tonya supported the symbiotic nature of peer association and student engagement when she said “[she and her] friends had the same goals. [They] would make sure [their] grades [were] good so that they could go to [college].” Conversely, Maleek revealed that his associated peers felt a lot like he did, that school was “a waste of time” and “that’s why [they] were skipping together.” The influence of peer associations has an impact, either positively or negatively, on student engagement experiences.

In addition to their teachers, families, and peer associations, students rely on other interpersonal relationships to strengthen their social capital networks. African American students would benefit from the support of professional and committed counselors, spiritual leaders, mental health therapists, career advisors, mentors, coaches, and advocates working in conjunction to develop social capital that positively impacts student engagement experiences in urban school settings. Denzel, when speaking about his football coach, said, “[he] had so much

hope for me ... he [saw] something in me that nobody had seen. Coach definitely had faith in me.” Students need to be seen and affirmed in this way because validation contributes to the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs. Kendra recognized the need for “somebody else, outside of [a student’s] teacher, that [they] can go and talk to.” Students need readily accessible, compassionate, positive, and knowledgeable adults who will listen, assist, inspire, and support them to academic achievement while nurturing their greatest hopes, dreams, and potential. Ensuring that young people are connected to caring and responsive adults will anchor their self-identity, and increase their feelings of relatedness and safety, while positively impacting their overall school engagement and academic achievement.

The concept of social capital, a mutually beneficial network of cooperative individuals, institutions, and systems, presumes that this network exists within a specific social setting (Claridge, 2013; Same et al., 2018). The community, both the neighborhood that the school is in and the greater community, is the context for social capital and the proverbial stage from which the phenomenon of student engagement is unfurled. Tonya asked, “Is ghetto an appropriate word to use?,” before going on to say that where her school was located was “very ghetto. It was bad.” Too many students contend with factors in their homes and communities that negatively impact student engagement. Jewel cited “harsh socio-economic circumstances ... undiagnosed and or untreated mental issues, drugs and significant life changes – pregnancy, homelessness, violence in the home or surrounding area” as some of the home and community factors depleting student engagement, compromising autonomous forms of motivation, and neglecting basic psychological needs. Jaleel summed it up by saying that sometimes it’s just “too much on you”. Homelife and the community can negatively impact student engagement.

The neighborhood that students find themselves attending school in impacts a student's ability to fully engage with learning (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018; Cornell et al., 2016). Tonya recalled she and her classmates frequently saw "drug dealers outside, of course, getting quick money. So, they felt like, what did they need to come to school for." Jaleel, who attended school in a different part of the city, recalled "that was a bad neighborhood because it was always something around there, shootings, somebody selling drugs. It's always something right there." Schools need to be safe places where students can focus intently on engaging in school. Bianca said, "they could start by creating a safe space." Selah recommended "security on the inside and the outside" as a good idea. The neighborhoods and communities in which students attend school can either support or thwart the student engagement experiences of African American students in urban public-school settings. For students to reach elevated levels of engagement, a holistic, village mentality must be adopted by school districts and the communities to which they belong.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study interpret African American student engagement experiences in ACPS. These findings have policy and practice-related implications for not only students, but teachers, school and district leaders, parents, policymakers, and the community at large. There is an ongoing need to measure practices and policies according to their effectiveness to increase student engagement (Astin, 1999). The findings of this study seek to inform ACPS stakeholders regarding how to plan, implement, and sustain educational programs which promote student engagement and satisfy the basic psychological needs of African American students attending ACPS schools. This section discusses the policy and practice-related implications derived from this study.

Implications for Policy

Public education, as a function of state and local jurisdictions, must begin to address the realities of African American students' school experiences. The policies created for ACPS in state house legislative assemblies and school board convenings must allow for innovative, student-centered, culturally relevant practices that address the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. Some existing policies do not meet the needs of today's ACPS learners and do not reflect the interests, identities, desires, and aspirations of its students. Policies related to school scheduling, staffing, funding, curricular content, course offerings, and pedagogical practices should all be revisited to maximize engagement for ACPS African American students.

Scheduling. ACPS policymakers should strongly consider restructuring all facets of school scheduling. Bianca and other study participants “hope the school week gets shorter or the school days get shorter ... truly it's just not productive.” They hope the ACPS makes adjustments. First, the academic school year should be addressed. The current tradition of summer vacation or summer break does not serve any purpose other than to facilitate the learning loss that is known to occur during these breaks (McNeish & Dumas, 2021; Skinner, 2014). Although students do need breaks, the extended summer vacation during which students are cognitively disengaged should be reconsidered. African American ACPS students, who have regularly shown learning deficits across various metrics, do not benefit from this tradition. Policymakers should consider moving to a 12-month educational model to reduce learning loss and school disengagement. There are a number of models being employed by public, private, and charter schools across the country. By moving to a year-round school model, opportunities for innovative and flexible school weeks and school days can be imagined and implemented.

One way that a year-round school model may prove beneficial to ACPS students is in a re-envisioned school week. Policymakers should consider repurposing the traditional seven- to eight-hour, Monday through Friday school week to better serve students. Portions or entire school days could be used for remediation, independent studies, post-graduation workshops and development, career exploration, college planning, social-emotional well-being, community service, and a vast number of other student-centered interventions that contribute to holistic child development (Same et al., 2018). These types of interventions would have positive impacts on the affective and cognitive engagement of students.

There is room to reimagine the traditional ACPS school day. Currently, students move from one siloed class to the next. In between classes, there are small windows of time in which students traverse often overcrowded hallways. Sometime during the school day, often late in the day, there is a short 20- to 30-minute lunch period where students are expected to get their lunches, eat, use the restroom, go to their lockers, and make it to their next silo, where they are expected to engage in learning. There is no time built into the school day where teenagers are encouraged to socialize with their peers and teachers in a structured way, use their phones and social media (trends which are here to stay), or get any respite from the academic work of the day. This schedule has a negative impact on all engagement domains. Behavioral engagement suffers because students will inevitably check their phones, linger too long at their locker, socialize during lessons, or otherwise exhibit behaviors that are infractions to school rules or expectations (Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Olson & Peterson, 2015). Cognitive engagement often suffers because students get ‘burnt out.’ Why is it that teachers get a period ‘off,’ but students are expected to maintain focus and stay cognitively engaged for the duration of a ‘work’ day? Students are not machines. Students are children. As a psychological need, students require

opportunities to socialize with their peers and interact with caring and supportive adults (Fang et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). When the need for positive social interaction is not supported, students perceive school as a totalitarian and dictatorial day camp, reducing their affective engagement in school. By rethinking how the school year, weeks, and days are scheduled, ACPS policymakers can make a positive impact on all domains of student engagement.

Staffing. Students will benefit from a change in who is recruited to be an ACPS teacher because teachers are the most significant extrinsic factors in student engagement experiences (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012; Digamon & Cinches, 2017). All students deserve competent teachers; however, ACPS students often find themselves taught by teachers who are not. Policymakers should put an end to unlicensed, ill-trained, under-supported, and weak teachers routinely being placed in front of ACPS students (Bottiani et al., 2016; Konold et al., 2017; Kunjufu, 2002; Olesker, 1997; Same et al., 2018). Teachers can no longer teach solely from textbooks. Teachers can no longer lean entirely on curriculum guides without the ability to connect learning to real-world applications. It is no longer acceptable for teachers to prepare students for compensatory state tests and yet fail to prepare them for life beyond high school. Going forward, ACPS educators must be competent in connecting academic content to the world that students will find themselves in.

Not only do ACPS students find themselves in the hands of pedagogically inferior teachers, but they often experience teachers who are emotionally incompetent. Policymakers must find a way to recruit and retain educators who have a heart for the work (Same et al., 2018). Teaching is not like other professions, as it is a labor of love. Marginalized students, especially, need teachers who are patient, vested, and understanding (Same et al., 2018). If students do not

believe their educators care about them, they will disengage. They deserve teachers who can see beyond their current life circumstances and learning deficits, and who will cultivate and inspire each student and their individual greatness.

ACPS policymakers must address the need for students to have culturally intelligent teachers (Freire, 2000; Kunjufu, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sims, 2016). Public education, and in fact America itself, is not culturally homogenous. ACPS students deserve teachers who understand them culturally and who can connect with them through their cultural sensibilities. Tonya expressed her concern about teachers' ability to understand the students that they are charged to teach when she acknowledged "they didn't really relate to the students." For ACPS students to completely engage in learning, those teaching them must do so through the lens of the African American historical and cultural experiences. ACPS students need teachers who not only look like them, move like them, sound like them, and think like them, but also, and most importantly, understand them.

Allocation and oversight of funding. ACPS policymakers should revisit how funding is allocated and used to support student achievement. ACPS students' affective engagement is, and has been for some time, negatively impacted by questionable spending practices. The amount of funding received per pupil for ACPS does not seem to be the issue, but how those funds are spent and accounted for may be. ACPS receives comparable, and in some cases more, per-pupil funding than do students attending schools in high-performing school districts in the region. However, in most ACPS schools the achievement and matriculation results are not being produced. Policymakers need to hold ACPS accountable for its spending practices and ensure that students' academic resources and school facilities are conducive for optimal student engagement.

Many ACPS schools lack sufficient educational resources. These resources include things such as textbooks and other supplemental learning materials, computer labs, adequate internet connectivity, and peripherals such as dry-erase whiteboards in lieu of chalkboards. To meet the 21st-century learning needs of its students, ACPS policymakers need to provide its students with 21st-century learning environments. Chalkboards have no place in modern American classrooms. Reliable internet access should not be a question for any American students. Students are fully aware of the lack of opportunities and educational inequities that exist in their schools and engage accordingly.

Many African American students attending ACPS do not attend schools in learning environments that support student engagement. Heating, air conditioning, and potable water should be the standard, no matter the cost. Temporary fixes, such as box fans, water coolers, and hand sanitizer have too often become status quo in ACPS and serve to further marginalize students. School facilities that are poorly maintained negatively impact students' affective engagement and reduce behavioral engagement. All students deserve the resources that facilitate learning. Instead, many ACPS students attend schools which are as inadequately resourced and comparably inferior to schools that existed during the Jim Crow era.

ACPS policymakers should consider how extracurricular and specialty programming is being funded (Same et al., 2018). Students need to engage with school beyond the traditional academic content and school day. ACPS should strongly consider system-wide tutoring and remediation offerings, expanding Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and other Career and Technical Education (CTE) opportunities, as well as an increased commitment to arts and athletic programs. Behavioral and affective engagement have been shown to increase when extracurricular and specialty programming is readily available and

accessible (Orrock & Clark, 2015; Same et al., 2018). ACPS students are not receiving the maximum educational benefits that come by way of experiencing school as a holistic learning and developmental community.

Curriculum. ACPS policymakers should consider overhauling the entire curriculum structure to ensure its students' interests, histories, and futures are being aligned and integrated with state-wide educational standards. Policymakers can directly impact students' cognitive engagement by adopting an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning, including culturally relevant content and connecting traditional academic studies to real-world, 21st-century applications.

ACPS students may be struggling to engage in school because the courses and subject matter are being taught independently from one another. ACPS students would experience higher levels of cognitive engagement if the educational curriculum were interdisciplinary. African American students, and indeed all students, need to understand how content areas converge with one another and are applicable in the real world. The disjointed nature of instruction causes students to question its relevance. Until students can see the purpose of what they are being taught, they will continue to disengage from instruction. It is important that teachers, and more importantly the curriculum, connect content areas to each other and to real-world applications. An interdisciplinary approach would allow students to see how subject areas and their content converge, synthesizing learning and making it more practical.

ACPS policymakers must learn the negative impact students suffer when they do not see themselves and their cultures represented in what they are being taught (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). ACPS, a predominantly African American school district, cannot continue teaching from a strictly Euro-centric tradition as it is damaging to identity formation in young African

Americans. African American students want their instructional experiences to provide an accurate account of their past and a glimpse into their futures. They want to see themselves in lessons, textbooks, and instruction. As an example, ACPS should strongly consider teaching American History through the lens of the African American experience, as this history is the history which is most relevant to African American students. It will no longer suffice to discuss the institution of American slavery as a footnote to the Civil War. African American students should be taught how the troubled history of slavery, colonization, and institutionalized racism (i.e., Black Codes, Jim Crow, redlining, apartheid, etc.) have impacted not only African Americans but descendants of the African diaspora worldwide. Connections to contemporary social, economic, and political conditions should be made for students by using this long lens of history. World histories should not ignore the role of Africa and the African in the history of humanity. In literature, classic literary themes can be taught using a variety of texts culturally significant to ACPS students. African American students see little to no value in studying Shakespeare and the like. ACPS must stop 'whitewashing' its curriculum if it hopes to cognitively engage its African American students (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). To deprive a child of the opportunity to learn who they are, where they have come from, what they have overcome and how they have arrived to where they find themselves is socially, morally and culturally unjust. African American students are acutely aware of the omission of Africa, the African, and the African American from their public-school curriculum. This conscious suppression of information is oppressive and negatively impacts relatedness to academic content and cognitive engagement (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). The countless contributions of Africans and African Americans, across the globe and throughout history, must be prominently situated before African American students. For African American student engagement to be fully realized

culturally, relevant instruction must connect African American students with their complex histories.

Curriculum choices made by ACPS policymakers must reflect 21st-century skills and opportunities. ACPS students do not deserve the type of education that leads them to minimum-wage job prospects. Students realize this type of education is meaningless to improving their lives. This type of educational programming leads to disengagement and further exacerbates individual and community challenges. Rather, the curriculum should introduce students to, and allow them to interact with, opportunities for gainful, upward mobile employment, admission to institutions of higher education, and entrepreneurial enterprises. If students are shown how the skills they are developing in high school can render greater opportunities in the work force, they are likely to engage and remain in school.

Implications for Practice

Policy changes can often take time to implement. However, ACPS educators, families, and stakeholders can address educational practices in ways that will positively support student engagement more expeditiously than through elongated bureaucratic channels. ACPS educators can work to build meaningful relationships with students and their families, as well as transition to more desirable pedagogical practices, as a means to nourish student engagement in ACPS students. ACPS families can become more involved with their students' education and the community in which they reside and learn. If education in ACPS remains status quo, ACPS community leaders, parents, and educators should consider leveraging charter schools to provide students the high-quality and meaningful public education they deserve.

Rapport Building. In education, there is a common saying: Students do not care about how much you know, until they know how much you care. The relationship between students

and their teachers is one of the most significant factors leading to elevated levels of student engagement (Same et al., 2018). ACPS teachers must build authentic and meaningful relationships with their students to facilitate elevated levels of student engagement (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). Rapport building is critical for the satisfaction of students' basic psychological need of relatedness. Until meaningful relationships are established, and students see their teachers as people who they respect and can relate to, teachers are little more than talking heads to be tolerated until the sounding of the bell. Educators should commit time to learning about their students, as well as allowing their students an opportunity to get to know them. Students will cognitively engage with the content when they know, trust, and can relate to those doing the teaching. It is necessary for educators to study each child and find creative ways to exchange knowledge, develop students' skills, identify students' abilities, and extract the brilliance that is contained within every child. When this happens, engagement increases. Although former ACPS students have identified the role of teacher–student rapport, it may also be a contributing factor to levels of student engagement in similar school districts.

Pedagogical Paradigm Shift. ACPS students require fresh approaches to the teaching and learning process. This shift in pedagogy should consider the learning preferences of students. More traditional forms of instruction do not provide students with the autonomy that ACPS students desire (Fredericks et al., 2019). They find traditional methods of teaching boring, restrictive, and uninteresting. ACPS students value collaborative, project-based learning opportunities that allow them to self-express. Although African American students tend to disengage under traditional pedagogy, their teachers continue to utilize industrial-age instructional practices that are not conducive to their needs. ACPS teachers who use non-traditional teaching methods can positively impact student engagement, even in content areas in

which students are deficient or uninterested. ACPS students want to interact, collaborate, and participate with one another while learning. Students want to feel like instruction is *for* them, as opposed to *at* them.

ACPS students want to see themselves, not the teacher, as the central focus of their classroom experiences. ACPS students want instruction that can be manipulated and augmented in accordance with their individual goals, desires, and personalities. ACPS educators can positively impact student engagement by re-evaluating their approach to instruction. While ACPS students have identified pedagogical experiences as playing a role in their student engagement, pedagogical practices may also be impacting the student engagement of students in other school districts as well.

Students who find themselves depositories of information will disengage. However, engagement is known to increase when students are presented with choice and opportunities to self-express in their academic endeavors. By committing to providing instruction that is interactive, interdisciplinary, meaningful, and exciting, ACPS educators can create learning situations conducive to elevated levels of student engagement. Even the most intrinsically motivated student can find themselves disengaged when schools and educators fail to appeal to their individual academic, social-emotional, and cultural needs and desires. While project-based, hands-on, interdisciplinary, and highly personalized instruction and assessment are required to ensure that ACPS students' need for autonomy and competence are met, it may also be effective for other school districts and students.

Family and Community. ACPS families must be willing to partner with their student's teachers and schools, but also be prepared to augment learning when necessary (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Bingham & Okagaki, 2012; Same et al., 2018). This can be done directly or by

soliciting the necessary help required to ensure student success. ACPS families must be devoted advocates who intercede for the educational needs and entitlements of their students. Parents and guardians should actively participate in school-related activities such as parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school programs, and parent-teacher associations, as well as lend their time and expertise whenever possible. By doing so, ACPS parents can undergird and strengthen the school community, not only for their child or children but for every attending student. Increased family and parental involvement may also play a significant role in the student engagement experiences in other school settings.

If students are to reach optimal levels of engagement, the ACPS community must be involved. Although former ACPS students have identified the role that the community played in their engagement, it may also be a contributing factor in other majority African American, urban school districts. Community involvement can be achieved through several symbiotic means. ACPS should seek meaningful, non-traditional partnerships with a variety of community members, entities, and organizations. Students will benefit from partnerships that yield resources such as voluntary contributions of skill sets and expertise, and exposure to opportunities beyond graduation. At the very least, ACPS communities cannot serve to thwart student engagement (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012). ACPS schools must be legitimate safe zones where crime, violence, and chaos are not tolerated. When the ACPS community makes strides to increase safety, stem the tide of crime and violence, and support the efforts of students and educators, students attending school in those communities reap the benefits in the form of increased relatedness to that community.

Students must be able to recognize the interconnectedness of ACPS schools and the greater ACPS community. Since much of what students experience in their day-to-day lives

happens in the community, students must also be required to have a positive impact on the communities in which they live and attend school. Neighborhood cleanups, adopting senior citizens, planting and maintaining community gardens, and hosting regular community events are just a few ways in which schools and their students can have a positive impact on their communities. When students begin to take pride in the communities where their schools are located, those communities reap the benefits.

Leverage Charter Schools. Since the early 1990s, states across the country have passed legislation authorizing individuals, groups, organizations, and higher education institutions to design, launch, and manage publicly funded, autonomous schools targeted to specific student populations (Convertino, 2017). A major benefit of leveraging charter schools is increased accountability. Underperforming charter schools do not last long, forced to close their doors due to lack of achievement, while innovative and effective charter schools thrive.

The deficiencies of ACPS are generational and its issues are well documented (Olesker, 1997). The solutions, however, are slow to non-existent. It may not be prudent to wait for ACPS to institute the necessary changes that ACPS students and families deserve. By leveraging charter schools specifically designed to address the needs of students and the community, educational stakeholders can infuse change into the city sooner rather than later (Same et al., 2018). ACPS parents and their students may consider withdrawing their students from ACPS schools and enrolling them into a successful charter school with a proven track record of fostering student engagement and academic achievement. Although some existing charter schools servicing former ACPS students have made a tremendous impact, not all have proven to be equally transformative. Therefore, considerable research is required on the part of families when considering transitioning their students from traditional public schools to charters.

A major issue often associated with the most successful charter schools is the extensive waiting list of students hoping to be enrolled. In such instances, ACPS educators, parents, community leaders, and stakeholders should consider launching new charter schools designed to meet the needs of their students or expand the footprint of those charters who have proven to be successful. While leveraging charter schools may be an effective way for ACPS families, educators, and stakeholders to create effective school communities, it may also be an effective strategy for other urban communities facing similar issues and concerns.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

Self-determination theory hinges on basic psychological needs satisfaction. Meeting these psychological needs increases student engagement across all three domains of student engagement (affective, behavioral, cognitive). Ryan and Niemiec (2009) concluded “that people have a set of basic psychological needs that must be satisfied for them to remain active and for optimal development to occur” (p. 68). The satisfaction of a student’s need for relatedness, critical for inducing intrinsic motivation, is closely related to a student’s degree of affective engagement. Similarly, autonomy and behavioral engagement are commingled, as are competence and cognitive engagement (Deci et al., 2017; Guo, 2018; Kurt & Tas, 2018; Sims, 2016). When these basic psychological needs go unmet, the result is amotivation and apathy, causing a decline in all three domains of student engagement. The consequences of deteriorating student engagement, or disengagement, is underachievement, low school satisfaction, and in the most severe cases, school dropout (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The social and structural contexts by which psychological needs are nurtured or neglected are one and the same as those promoting elevated levels of student engagement. In this study, each participant communicated how their experiences with school, teachers, academic content, teaching style and pedagogy, the learning

environment, peers, family, and their community worked to support or thwart their psychological needs, as well as support or undermine their levels of student engagement.

Relatedness and Affective Engagement

Participants articulated that relatedness was the most significant psychological need contributing to their experiences with school engagement. Ryan and Deci (2000) summarized relatedness as a contextual sense of belonging to a community, environment, or situation. It is an innate, interpersonal need to connect with and belong to the larger contextual group (Fang et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Affective engagement, or the overall positive or negative feeling towards school and school-related activities, is intricately connected to how students experience relatedness. Both relatedness and affective engagement were found to extend to teachers, peers, family, academic content, and the learning environment. It was also found to impact how the participants internalized and positioned themselves within the context of school and education.

Teachers do indeed play an integral role in students' affective engagement and in the satisfaction of relatedness (Geraci et al., 2017; Leath et al., 2019; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Sims, 2016; Verkuyten et al., 2019). Sonya and several other participants emphasized the importance of teachers creating “understanding,” “judgement free” learning environments where students felt comfortable approaching their teachers (Cornell et al., 2016; Guo, 2018; Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019). Kendra recalled wanting to feel like her teachers “cared” about her as a person (Durkesen et al., 2017). Participants reported that the very reason that they engaged in some classes was because of the disposition and “warmth” of the teacher. Conversely, Ahmad, Maleek, and others found that their affective engagement was diminished by negative relationships and experiences with teachers who were “there for the paycheck” (Konold et al.,

2017; Kunjufu, 2002; Verkuyten et al., 2019). Tonya shared that, culturally, many of her teachers were unable to relate to her and her classmates, which made engagement more arduous (Rivera, 2019). In addition to teachers, participants pointed to how other adults in the learning community similarly supported or thwarted their levels of student engagement based on their ability to reach them, or relate to them, on personal levels (Schenkenfelder et al., 2020).

Participants confirmed that peers and group associations also contributed to their feelings of relatedness and perceptions of school (Dary et al., 2016; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Sabin, 2015; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Participants revealed that their peer affiliations were indicative of how they associated with school. Participants like Faith, Sonya, and Tonya expressed that their friendship groups helped them to stay focused and relate to school in positive ways, while Denzel, Maleek, and Bianca expressed that their peers frustrated their sense of school-relatedness and caused their affective engagement to flounder. School-related, extra-curricular associations had similar impacts on the participants' school-relatedness (Geraci et al., 2017; Orrock & Clark, 2015; Pascoe, 2016). Sonya, Jewel, and Maleek credit their associations with extra-curricular programming as their primary means of feeling connected to school. Faith and Bianca, neither of whom had meaningful extra-curricular experiences, could not account for feeling any real sense of school connection or relatedness. Participants support the literature arguing that positive peer and organization affiliation produces greater affective engagement and undergirds feelings of relatedness, and the opposite implications hold true as well.

Participants indicated that their families contributed to their experiences with school-relatedness. They reported that their families held certain expectations for them and required varying degrees of engagement (Bellibas, 2016; Fernandez-Suarez et al., 2016; Kurt & Tas, 2018; Tough, 2012). Some participants recalled their family members making school attendance

a requirement. This controlled form of motivation, however, did not increase participants' affective engagement. Jaleel said that he was told that he had to attend school and graduate or else he would have to move out of his mother's home. So, he went, but never fully engaged, only putting "in a little bit to learning" because school was "dumb in [his] eyes." Jaleel's experience supports the idea that controlled motivation does not lead to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (Guo, 2018), but instead cultivates disengagement (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wijsman et al., 2018).

Others reported that they engaged in and completed high school as a means to make their family members proud, while some said that in their family, attending college was the expectation—consequently, these participants found a great deal of support from members of their family and went on to higher education. In the experiences of both Selah and Faith, their parents were "big on school." Their extrinsic motivators were integrated into their own desires based on pro-school familial relatedness, resulting in more positive school experiences (Gravel et al., 2016; Willem et al., 2017). In this way, families play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of school and engagement. Kendra acknowledged that her connection to school grew stronger and her level of student engagement increased due to her mother's vigilance. Her mother took action to ensure that she was in the most conducive environment for her educational needs (Kurt & Tas, 2018). Parental involvement can serve to increase affective engagement by instilling worth and value to education.

The condition, climate, and culture of the learning environment, both inside the building and in the greater community, served to support or thwart student relatedness with school and impacted affective engagement (Cornel et al., 2016; Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018; Reeve, 2012). Poor learning conditions and subpar resources do not satisfy the need of relatedness and

negatively impact affective engagement. Denzel suggested the intense heat of the summer and the brutal cold of winter were primary reasons why some students do not go or want to go to school. Selah and Bianca spoke of overcrowded classrooms that made it “hard to focus” (Wijsman et al., 2018). The learning environment also consists of school climate (Olson & Peterson, 2015). Tonya said the culture and climate of her school were “very, ghetto,” which caused her to disassociate with her school and some of her classmates. This resulted in a reduction of positive feelings she felt about her learning environment (Kane et al., 2016). Additionally, participants validated the impact of “a student’s connectedness to the external environment of the school” (Olson & Peterson, 2015, p. 2) on student engagement. Multiple participants conveyed that the communities that housed their schools were crime-riddled and often unsafe, negatively impacting their affective engagement even prior to entering the building. Sonya recalled a series of targeted student attacks that took place around her school. She concluded, “if you got into a fight on the way to school, by the time you got to school you wasn’t worried about doing no schoolwork.” Participants talked about the negative impact of navigating neighborhoods laden with drugs and drug dealers, gang members, robberies, violence, and other criminal activities on their commutes to school. These environmental issues negatively impact students’ ability to affectively engage, relate positively to their learning environments, and self-actualize (Pascoe, 2016). Other participants had entirely different experiences. Jewel, for example, spoke of her high school experiences fondly. She was pleased about the neighborhood in which she attended school, and which contributed to her positive student engagement experiences (Orrock & Clark, 2015). Jewel’s description of nearby bookstores, coffee shops, and museums stood in stark contrast to the experiences of other participants, leaving her with a highly favorable sense of connection and belonging to her “artsy fartsy” school community, as

she called it. This further supported the notion that relatedness and affective engagement can be nurtured or neglected through the learning environment (Durkesen et al., 2017).

Relatedness can be nourished through academic content (Geraci et al., 2017; Carrabba & Farmer, 2018). Participants expressed an inability to relate to much of the content and often perceive what they are being taught as impractical or culturally irrelevant (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Orrock & Clark, 2015). Tonya asked why anyone *needed* to study Shakespeare, while both Kendra and Bianca questioned why there were so few courses and lessons about the African American experience, past and present. Maleek called much of what he was taught “useless.” Conversely, participants confirmed the findings of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Orrock and Clark (2015) by pronouncing that students are more inclined to engage and enjoy learning when the content is “relatable or interesting”, incorporating “something that [students are] interested in.”

Trepte and Loy (2017) point to the significance of relatedness through the alternative theoretical frameworks of social-identity theory and self-categorization theory. Using Tajfel and Turner’s 1970s work on the psychology of social identity, the researchers identify the role of group affiliation in the development of healthy and positive self-concepts. Tajfel and Turner (1979) concluded that positive social identity produces greater self-esteem and a stronger sense of relatedness. Additionally, Trepte and Loy (2017) acknowledge the usefulness of Turner’s 1999 research and self-categorization theory in understanding how individuals see themselves, both personally and socially. Both theoretical frames can be advanced by more fully understanding how relatedness is nurtured or neglected.

Autonomy and Behavioral Engagement

According to self-determination theory, it is critical that individuals possess a sense of control over their own behaviors, actions, and decisions to induce intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schenkenfelder et al., 2020), whereas behavioral engagement entails compliance with school and class norms and rules, as well as participation and involvement in school-related and extracurricular activities (Olson & Peterson, 2015). Both constructs hinge on the notions of voice and choice. Students want to be heard. Unfortunately, participants were not afforded many autonomous learning opportunities and found this basic psychological need suppressed during their ACPS school experiences (Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Sims, 2016).

Participants felt that the school setting was too controlling and often domineering (Peart, 2018). From the rigidity of the school-day schedule to the requirements for graduation, participants found little to no flexibility in their school experiences, thus weakening their autonomy and causing some students to withdraw, or disengage, from school and school-related activities. Bianca recounted “not having any breaks,” while Kendra emphasized the value of her free periods as opportunities to “rest and take [her] time, get [herself] together” because “even at a job you get a break after a certain period of time.” Participants believed that students break rules and “misbehave” because they are not afforded opportunities during the school day to simply be kids. Participants explained that students sneak to use their phones or skip class to reclaim their autonomy, while simultaneously reducing their behavioral engagement.

Participants found many aspects of their school experiences lacked autonomy, none more so than constricting pedagogical practices. Pedagogically, participants expressed a preference towards interactive, project-based, hands-on, and flexible instruction in which they have choice in the approach and the output (Carrabba & Farmer, 2018; Leath et al., 2019; Louwrens &

Hartnett, 2015). Tonya and Ahmad said they preferred assignments that provided them with choice. However, they were typically met with more traditional methods of teaching, which reduces students' behavioral engagement levels (Carrabba & Farmer, 2018). Leslie said the fastest way for her to disengage was to be presented with something that was boring. She went on to articulate that she has always been a "hands-on person" who unfortunately was not afforded a lot of hands-on learning opportunities in high school. Kendra and Maleek both grimaced at what they called "boring" and "regular" work. Kendra said that she performed best when she was allowed to interact and Maleek said that he excelled at project-based assignments (Carrabba & Farmer, 2018; Fang et al., 2018; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Participants also emphasized the desire to have alternative means of demonstrating mastery. They indicated that simply taking a paper test is not the best means of assessing what students know and are able to do (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sims, 2016).

Competence and Cognitive Engagement

As a basic psychological need, competence is an individual's perceived or actual ability to complete a task or accomplish a goal (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schenkenfelder et al., 2020), while cognitive engagement is the mental investment in learning, in-depth thinking, and overall commitment to academic achievement (Saeed & Zyniger, 2012). Both concepts are dependent upon an individual's acquired skills and experiences with successful outcomes. Participants in this research study discussed how their competencies were undermined by a lack of academic preparation, either through poor instruction in earlier grade levels or through the practice of social promotion. In this way, teachers, school leaders, and district policies serve as hindrances to competence, which diminishes a students' cognitive engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sonya recalled that her teachers "expected" her and her classmates "to know certain things" that they

simply had not learned (Fang et al., 2018). Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with classes where there was little to no individualized instruction or teacher feedback, and a distinct lack of clearly articulated expectations (Dary et al., 2016). At some point in the study, each participant articulated a need for additional instructional supports that were not readily available to them. Participants validated the school environment's role in their experiences with competence and cognitive engagement, noting that a lack of academic resources and inadequate facilities reduced their productivity (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Limitations and Delimitations

There were several limitations that emerged during this research study. The first, and maybe most significant, limitation was the necessity to move all data collection activities to virtual platforms, as opposed to face-to-face collection. In the interest of safety and concern for the spread and transmission of the Covid-19 virus, an abundance of caution was pursued to ensure that participants were not taking any unnecessary risks by participating in the study. For that reason, all data collection activities, which were initially planned to be completed in person, were conducted virtually. Questionnaires were collected via Google Forms and focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom teleconferencing. As a result, data collection was less intimate, interactions were less natural and organic, and the nuances of communication were reduced or potentially lost in their entirety (i.e., participants not enabling cameras during focus groups or semi-structured interviews). Another limitation that emerged from this study was the gender composition of the participants. Eight out of the twelve participants were women; the remaining four participants were men. This limitation represents a study dominated by female student engagement experiences. This is significant due to studies that indicate that male students and African American male students, specifically, have lower

levels of school engagement than do their female counterparts and students of other ethnicities (Hartono et al., 2019; Orrock & Clark, 2015). The age of the participants can be viewed as a limitation to this study, as no participant was above the age of 31 years old or younger than 18 years old, thus leaving the study devoid of the perspectives of younger students and older former students of ACPS. Lastly, most participants in this study have at least some post-secondary educational experiences. One might infer that these participants had higher levels of engagement during their public high school educational experiences.

I made intentional and purposeful decisions about the parameters, or delimitations, of the research study. These delimitations include the phenomenological approach, the setting of the study, and the participant demographics. First, I decided to utilize a hermeneutic, as opposed to transcendental, phenomenological approach for this study. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. As one of the goals of this study is to transform the educational experiences of students whose lived experiences are similar to those of the participants, it is of paramount importance to go beyond the mere description of experiences and examine the whatness, or essence, of these experiences in order to effect systemic changes that lead to greater levels of student engagement for marginalized students, schools, and communities.

This research study was delimited by the chosen setting. An urban school district was identified, over suburban or rural school districts, due to its saturation of African American students. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2018), “rural America is less racially and ethnically diverse than the nation’s urban areas.” The setting was selected partially because of the city’s well-documented social and economic struggles faced by the

community. For more than a decade, the city has reported one of the highest per capita murder rates in the country, has struggled with a drug and addiction epidemic, and has been marred by cyclical political corruption, declining population and tax revenues, and community blight. Lastly, the studied urban school district, ACPS, was chosen for its generational challenges with student achievement, attendance, and high school matriculation. That is not to say ACPS does not have tremendous success stories, it does. However, ACPS has also failed entire generations of students and the community at large. The ACPS school district has been underserving its students and the community since at least the early 1970s (Olesker, 1997) and continues to do so today.

Another delimiting factor of this research study is the focus on the experiences of former students of one urban school district, as opposed to sampling from several different urban school districts. This decision was made to account for the *shared* lived experiences, while restricting potentially mitigating factors (i.e., per-pupil funding, strengths/challenges of the community, school resources, etc.) impacting student engagement experiences.

The homogeneous ethnicity of participants was a conscious delimitation of this study. African Americans have historically faced challenges in being publicly educated throughout this country's history. These challenges still exist today. By focusing this study on the educational experiences of former African American students, much can be learned about the most current state of education for a historically disenfranchised people.

Lastly, the period in which the participants were last enrolled as ACPS students serves as a delimitation. Participants were required to have attended high school between the years of 2010 and 2020, which isolates this study within the context of the last decade.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study specifically sought out the engagement experiences of African Americans who had graduated or left their urban public school within the past ten years. It is recommended that future studies be conducted augmenting these demographic delimitations. A similar study focused on the student engagement experiences of Hispanic and Latino students can prove beneficial for increasing and maintaining engagement of the country's fastest-growing minority group. Like African American students, Hispanic and Latino students have had troubling and challenging histories with public education in America. A study comprised of 50–100% male participants could also prove beneficial to gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences that lead to greater engagement in male students. Another recommendation is to conduct a similar study with dropouts exclusively. The engagement experiences of this demographic may prove to be invaluable in understanding what practices, pedagogy, and supports can help to keep students highly engaged through to high school graduation. Conducting future studies that examine the engagement experiences of current students can have an impact on the school completion and overall satisfaction of students. Studies examining older individuals, possibly in their 40s, or older, may provide useful insight into the longitudinal effects of student engagement.

It is recommended that future studies be conducted with different setting parameters. Research studies focused on the engagement experiences of students who all attended the same school could shine light on individual school practices inhibiting higher levels of student engagement. Studies that examine the worst-performing urban school districts collectively could prove to highlight overarching experiences and practices that reduce student engagement across geographic regions and produce general best practices that can be adopted in school districts facing the same or similar issues. Lastly, while this study specifically focused on the experiences

of urban student engagement, students in rural areas of the country face unique experiential challenges of their own. Future studies conducted on the student engagement experiences of rural students would yield useful information on the nature of student engagement when juxtaposed beside urban studies.

It is recommended that future studies employ alternative research methods and designs. A series of narrative studies, collecting and analyzing the experiences of student engagement from participants, will provide greater in-depth descriptions of individual student engagement. These exhaustive studies will be useful for extrapolating the experiential impacts that may hold true for general populations of students. Although this study is qualitative in its approach, a quantitative approach could provide useful data. A correlational quantitative study would be useful in gaining data from a large sample and determining how various experiences (i.e., instructional, interpersonal, autonomy, community, etc.) commingle to form an existing student's or former student's disposition toward school engagement.

Conclusion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This study is significant because it amplifies the experiential voices of those who are underrepresented in the literature on student engagement. The central research question addressed the general student engagement experiences of the participants, while the research sub-question elicited specificity of student engagement experiences. Twelve African Americans who formerly attended public secondary schools in the same urban school district provided data by completing qualitative questionnaires, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews reflecting on their engagement experiences. The

results from the analyzed data yielded five themes: Engagement Experiences, Instructional Consideration, Relationships, School-Related Experiences, and Non-School-Related Factors.

For African Americans, all domains of student engagement (affective, behavioral, cognitive) are influenced by the degree to which their basic psychological needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence are satisfied or neglected. Chief of these needs is the need for relatedness or belonging. Participants identified this psychological need as the cornerstone of student engagement and the factor that is most suited to accommodate other inadequacies in the educational setting. Autonomous forms of motivation are induced when a student's relatedness needs are met and, consequently, all forms of student engagement are positively impacted.

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APPENDIX A

Former African American student experiences with engagement in urban public high schools.

Consent

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE:

Dear research participant,

My name is Sohn A. Butts, and I am a graduate student in the department of education at Liberty University. I am conducting a research study to better understand the experiences that lead to student engagement in former African American students. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information that will help you decide if you are willing to voluntarily participate in this research study.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools. You will be asked to complete a survey, and participate in an interview, and a small group discussion with 2 to 4 former ACPS students.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools. It has been proven that when students are more engaged, they retain more information, have higher levels of academic achievement, and are more likely to complete and continue their education. It is also known that low student engagement often leads to school dropout, which is a well-documented concern in the community. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to interpret the student engagement experiences of African Americans formerly attending urban public high schools.

If you agree to participate you will be one of fifteen former ACPS students who will be participating in this research. There will be five participants per focus group.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will complete a survey, and participate in an individual and a group interview. All research activities will take place via Zoom and other online resources. The audio for both the individual and group interview will both be recorded for the study.

Your responses will be anonymous, and participants will be assigned pseudonyms for research study reporting. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used. Due to the nature of focus groups, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

The data will be stored in locked cabinets, password protected external computer hard drives, to which I will have sole access. The data will be kept for 3 years and destroyed at the end of that period via shredding and file deletions.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline participation at any time. You may also withdraw from the study at any time; there will be no penalty.

If you have questions about the study, please call me at _____ or e-mail me at _____
@gmail.com.

CONSENT:

By signing below, you agree to voluntarily participate in the above study.

- I give my permission to be audio taped.
- I do not give my permission to be audio taped.

Your name: _____

Your signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX B**PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE**

1. What zip code(s) did you live in while attending high school?
2. Which high school(s) did you attend?
3. What years did you attend high school?
4. Gender (M/F)
5. Age
6. Race/ethnicity
7. What were your reasons for engaging in school?
8. When you think about your high school experiences, how do you remember them?
9. What most interested you in learning during high school? Why?
10. If you had trouble understanding something in school who would you ask for help? Why?
11. What was your favorite class? Why did you enjoy this class?
12. What was your least favorite class? Why was the class not enjoyable?
13. What do you believe motivates students to graduate high school?
14. Why do you believe students drop out of high school?
15. What is one thing you would have changed about your high school experience?

APPENDIX C**FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

1. What are some things that you expect schools to provide for their students?
2. What were the factors that contributed to your engagement in school?
3. What were some elements of classroom instruction that positively impacted you?
Negatively?
4. From your experiences, what makes an effective teacher? An ineffective teacher?
5. What role did your family and friends play in your school engagement?
6. What factors do you believe cause students to drop out of school?
7. How has your high school education been of benefit to you?

APPENDIX D**SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Where did you attend high school?
2. When did you graduate or stop attending?
3. When you were in school, what did you aspire to be? Why?
4. When you were in school, how did you feel about school? Why?
5. How much effort did you put into learning? Explain?
6. What classes and/or lessons did you find most interesting? Why?
7. Tell me about an assignment that you enjoyed doing.
8. What types of assignments did you not enjoy? Why?
9. In what ways did your friends or classmates impact your school experiences?
10. What does it look like when someone is engaged in school?
11. How did you know when you were engaged in school?
12. What makes you want to engage in learning?
13. What do you believe teachers should do to help students learn?
14. What do you believe schools could do to help students achieve?
15. What role did your family have in your interest in school?
16. Tell me about the neighborhood or the area your high school was in.
17. Tell me something that would have increased your student engagement.
18. Is there anything else you would like to share about student engagement, even if it is something I did not ask about?