EXPLORING TEACHERS' STRATEGIES THAT MOTIVATE ACHIEVEMENT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS:

A SINGLE-CASE STUDY

by Charlie Howell III

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the United States, the academic achievement gap between African American and White students has been a growing concern. The purpose of this single-case study was to explore upper-elementary African American students' perceptions of effective motivational and instructional strategies in an eastern North Carolina private school. The self-determination theory of Ryan and Deci guided this study in exploring the central question: What instructional strategies have teachers used at the Center of Excellence to improve the motivation of African American students within the classroom? In addition, three sub-questions were considered: What instructional strategies have teachers used to foster autonomy among African American students? What instructional strategies have teachers used to foster relatedness among African American students? What instructional strategies have teachers used to help African American students become competent? This single-case study employed classroom observations, interviews, and documents as data sources. The researcher analyzed the data to identify themes and then to assign codes to them. Four themes emerged: Differentiated Instruction (or Differentiation), Teacher Affirmation, Cultural Awareness, and Relationships. The findings of this study determined that self-determination theory is a viable option for increasing the motivation of African American students. This study's findings also confirm that school systems can impact African Americans who suffer academically and lack motivation by providing professional development to teachers about instructional strategies.

Keywords: motivation, self-determination, African American students, teacher instructional strategies

Dedication

I want to dedicate this work to my parents: Charlie Howell Jr. and Edna Howell. Both of you have set an example of hard work and perseverance. I also want to dedicate this to my three children: Charlee, Charlie IV, and Charleigh. You have unknowingly pushed me because I desire to set an example and a standard for you. You must do *more*! One day you will read this and realize that God is faithful to His Word and will keep you even in difficult seasons. When you are frustrated, remember what David said in Psalm 37:25 (ESV): “I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread.”

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who has sealed this desire in me! I do not know what I would have done without you constantly reminding me of this goal. I look back and have no idea how I made it to this point. I have completed this during the most challenging season of my life, and I can genuinely say that I would never have made it without you!

My support system was solid! My family and friends, you are the best! Many of you were my research assistants, vent partners, coaches, and advisors. I want to say thank you for every text, word, and constant reminder to continue. You held my feet to the fire and demanded that I complete what I started.

To the most amazing chair in the world, Dr. Quindag. A friend recommended you, and I thought it was a fantastic connection until I started getting feedback. When I began to receive your feedback, I challenged the recommendation and wondered if I had made a mistake. All the while, it was a divine setup for success. You challenged my intellect and writing capabilities and continued raising the standard. Thank you for your patience. Looking back, I know it was all God! You are genuine, and I appreciate how you coached and pulled the best out of me!

Thank you to all the participants, parents, and staff who were so eager to participate in this study. You all made this a dream come true. Not only did you participate, but you did so with great spirit and with excellence.

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List of Abbreviations

Center of Excellence (COE)

cognitive evaluation theory (CET)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

local education agency (LEA)

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

North Carolina Education Evaluation System (NCEES)

self-determination theory (SDT)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this single-case study was to explore upper-elementary African American students' perceptions of effective motivational and instructional strategies in eastern North Carolina. Evidence revealed that a disproportionate academic achievement gap exists between African American students and White students (Paschall, Gershoff, & Kuhfeld, 2018). This phenomenon has significantly impacted the overall success of African Americans since education is the foundation for wealth, sustainability, and opportunities. Unfortunately, the academic gap reveals that there may be a systemic problem that has contributed to schools' poor academic performance, dropout rates, decreased career opportunities, violence in the African American communities, and the school-to-prison pipeline, indicating a vast need for reform, refocus, and revitalization (Bryan, 2017). Because of the academic achievement gap between Whites and African Americans, educators should be alerted that their teaching strategies could be an effective means to combat and reverse racism, poverty, and inequity. Both public and private schools should update professional development for teachers to address the academic gap. This chapter presents the background, theoretical frameworks, assumptions, central question, subsequent questions, problem statement, and purpose of the study.

Background

The existence of an academic gap between African American and Whites should alert educators that there is a problem related to African American students' success in school and post-graduation. This problem may contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline that many African American students fall victim to because they lack access to opportunities that their White counterparts have received during their school years (Grace & Nelson, 2019). African American

students are often trapped in the school-to-prison pipeline when they are not provided with the academic, social, and emotional support necessary to achieve educational success (Heitzeg, 2016). If they are not given the same opportunities to access the necessary resources and tools needed to acquire those college and career readiness skills, the adversity they face when trying to achieve socioeconomic upward mobility after graduation becomes an obstacle. However, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) analyzed achievement issues for African American students over the past two decades and found that all children are capable of learning and that African American students can increase their academic output when teachers provide an atmosphere that is culturally sensitive and relevant. (Paschall et al., 2018).

Historical Context

In the early to mid-1900s, African American students faced significant disadvantages due to the inequality of segregated schools (Fishback & Baskin, 1991; Margo, 1985). In the United States when the Jim Crow era ended in 1968, changes in education occurred. During the 1960s and 1970s, there were changes in education for African Americans because of Black activism and awareness (Bundy, 2017). Although the gap shrank during that period, it remained a constant issue in education. Racial and ethnic achievement gaps narrowed substantially in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s (Lee, 2002). As the United States began to pivot due to legislation that demanded integration, so did the status and the conditions of schools (Reber, 2010). This integration revealed a noticeable academic gap between African Americans and Whites. School systems either ignored the African American achievement gap or did not know a solution to the problem. Consequently, school districts' negligence led to legislative and executive initiatives at the state and national levels to address the problem (Paschall et al., 2018). Since the integration of schools in the mid to late 1960s, the federal government created the NAEP to assess

educational trends, including losses and gains for cohorts, demographics, and in some instances, poverty levels.

In the 1980s, Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores revealed that African American students scored an average of 332 for verbal and 362 for math, compared to 442 and 483 for Whites students (Education Week, 1982). Additionally, students from economically affluent backgrounds achieved higher SAT scores than those who struggled economically (Education Week, 1982). The first of half of the 1980s, the achievement gap continued to narrow (Lee, 2002). Chay, Guryan, and Mazumder (2009) credited this narrowing of the achievement gap to superior health of Black children in the South; desegregation afforded families access to improved health care.

The 2000s saw the implementation of federal mandates including No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001. These acts fostered accountability through standardized tests while requiring schools to be accountable for progress and growth, especially among underrepresented subgroups such as African American students (Hanushek, Peterson, Talpey, & Woessmann, 2019). Later in the 2000s, there was a movement to encourage students to study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses (Lisberg & Woods, 2018). These programs lacked African American participation because the STEM courses required equipment that was not available to them, nor was the curriculum tailored for African American students (King, Collier, Johnson, Acosta, & Southwell, 2021). Unfortunately, this achievement gap continues to be an aspect of education in the United States. Possible mentoring and academic guidance can offset African American failure in these courses (Lowry & Thomas-Anderson, 2017).

Social Context

There is a strong connection between economic status and access to information (Jensen, 2009). The disparities in the educational sector are related to poverty and lack of resources. Rothstein (2015) and Bowman, Comer, and Young (2018) agree that poverty and racism plague African American students, contributing to their stagnant achievement. Bowman et al. (2018) argued that technological advances placed a heavier burden on African American students because these advances are not readily available to underserved communities. Furthermore, generational poverty means there is a lack of resources and preparedness for African American students (Aysola, as cited in Rothstein, 2015). Rural school districts do not have the same access to information and resources urban school districts do (Sundeen & Sundeen, 2013). Although all students in public education are supposed to receive equal access based on the ruling in the 1964 *Brown v. Board of Education* case, some of these situations are not ideal (Dudziak, 2006).

Poverty and language barriers have caused African American students to enter school behind Whites (Henry, Betancur Cortés, & Votruba-Drzal, 2020). Consequently, expectations and the standard of what constitutes academic progress is in question. According to Bowman et al. (2018), providing literary support and bridging the continuity between preschool expectations and the primary grades in African American communities may positively impact these students. However, ignoring the differences between language at home and the school's expectations may cause barriers in the child's education (Baker-Bell, 2020). Thus, the remedy to this situation rests in teaching strategies.

According to Mondi and Reynolds (2021), socioemotional learning is critical in determining school readiness. When educators attend to the social and emotional needs of students it impacts how students function and think, playing a role in their willingness to

embrace learning (Gimbert, Miller, Herman, Breedlove, & Molina, 2023). Bryan (2017) cited an overwhelmingly middle-class and female population in the teaching profession, warranting attention to cultural preparedness so that school districts are preparing teachers to meet the needs of diverse students. Bryan (2017) further noted the intergenerational history of negative views of Black males, fostering a lowered tolerance level, which in turn fueled disproportionate suspension patterns. Social and emotional attention to African Americans in the classroom are needed to guide students toward a successful path while reducing suspension rates (Rothstein, 2015). Howard (2001) argued for an openness in education by which teachers try to provide a better social and academic experience for African American students, including linguistic, cultural, and social sensitivity. Other researchers reached similar conclusions about the ability of students to learn, revealing that the barriers to success mostly stem from socioeconomic factors since poverty limits access to resources, better school districts, and parental literacy (Bowman et al., 2018; Fishback & Baskin, 1991; Paschall et al., 2018; Rothstein, 2015).

Theoretical Context

This research explored teachers' use of strategies and any correlation to the motivational needs of African American students. Self-determination theory was the chosen framework because it focuses on three environmental factors that impact self-determination: confidence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) argued that there is an innate propensity for humans to be self-motivated and curious. This theory calls for an investigation of psychological needs and people's inherent growth tendencies. However, when the human spirit has experienced life's adversities, a potent byproduct is the tendency to reject growth and responsibility.

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a metatheory that comprises several subtheories, one

of which is cognitive evaluation theory (CET), which addresses factors that explain the variability of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). CET focuses on the need for competence (feelings of mastery) and autonomy (ownership in one's actions) (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Consequently, CET further implicates that competence will not enhance intrinsic motivation unless it is accompanied by autonomy (Fisher, 1978; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Often students enter the classroom with various experiences. As the constant in the school, educators have the power in the room to transform lives and foster opportunities for intrinsic motivation by using external factors, which may include various strategies and approaches (Ruzek et al., 2016). Additionally, there should be administrative support in the classroom to ensure that teachers are motivated to bring hope to students (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Three components play into how people develop their intrinsic motivation: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Therefore, I utilized SDT as a framework for this study to explore the motivation of African American students.

Situation to Self

Ryan and Deci (2000) explained the importance of intrinsic motivation and how feedback towards competence can foster an environment where that motivation builds in an individual. As an African American male, I found growing up in a predominately African American school to be quite challenging. Sometimes waves of lethargy overwhelmed my peers and me. Often, teachers would utilize deadlines, embarrassing comments, threats, and pressure to try to get us to measure up to their expectations, but those techniques are all contrary to positive motivational practices (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Unfortunately, most of the time, this extrinsic motivation lasted only until the incentives dried up. Although I had intrinsic motivation, which my family helped instill in me, many individuals I went to school with never graduated or succeeded in life

because they lacked that familial support.

I am currently a pastor of a nondenominational church that has established a private Christian school. As a second-generation educator, I have a well-informed understanding of educational pedagogy, the school system, and an array of teaching strategies that I have utilized in the classroom or observed in public schools. As an advocate for education and for a modern Harlem renaissance for the African American community, I hope to extend the research surrounding self-determination and the motivation of African American students.

For this study, I utilized the interpretive paradigm of social constructivism. Social constructs impact reality; some things happen outside of oneself that affect oneself. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that the social constructivist approach or worldview is somewhat open, allowing the participants to construct the meaning of a situation. By focusing on where individuals live and work, it is possible to understand the participants' historical and cultural settings. This framework allowed the participants to voice their thoughts, concerns, and comments around the topic, affording them an outlet that could lead to positive change.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My epistemological assumption was that all students can learn. However, the best way to know how they learn is to dialogue with students who are going through the experience. I determined their motivation when I discussed the content with the students during an interview. They had sufficient knowledge and understanding to give appropriate feedback (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There was minimal distance between me and the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1988).

Ontology is the study of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My ontological assumption was that African American students can develop the reality of a moral foundation when they are in the structured environment of a private school rather than a public school. Thus, the school

where I conducted the study was small, which enabled teachers to tailor their instruction to each child's academic needs.

Axiology is the study of values (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My axiological assumption was that students value education that is relevant to their lived experience, and that it is vital that teachers know what is relevant to their students, and then learn to structure their lessons around students' interests and values. Therefore, it is important to research the interests of students in relation to their education.

Problem Statement

The problem was that teachers often neglect the motivational needs of African American students (Flint, Sheppard, & Tackie, 2019; Grace & Nelson, 2019; Thomas, 2019;). Behavioral issues in the classroom arise when students are not motivated. These behaviors often are disruptions to learning and may result in African American students being academically behind their peers (Pearman, Curran, Fisher, & Gardella, 2019; Wint, Opara, Gordon, & Brooms, 2022). In a study conducted to explore trends in school readiness and behaviors, Reardon and Portilla (2016) found that academic achievement gaps between students of high-income areas as well as low-income areas were much larger than those of cohorts in the prior 20 years. Gregory and Roberts (2017) studied the behavioral issues and found that African American students received two or three times more referrals than White students did. They observed that when African Americans and White students exhibited similar disruptive behaviors, the African American students had a higher likelihood of being asked to leave the classroom for misconduct. The disparity in discipline gravely impacts the academic success and the motivation of African American students.

Some disruptions lead to suspensions (Gregory & Roberts, 2017), which is a significant problem in schools; the students are taken away from their learning environment, which can result in their not entering college or being career ready (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Novak, 2019). Furthermore, suspensions impact communities and can perpetuate generational poverty by excluding students from learning environments that help them to enter the workforce and pursue upward socioeconomic mobility (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Novak, 2019). As it relates to poverty, Paschall et al. (2018) concluded that more work needs to be done to assist African American students. Poverty impacts the students' success; however, low-income White and middle-class Black students are not affected to the same degree (Paschall et al., 2018). This issue affects the allocation of resources and opportunities. African American students would drop out of school and restrict their opportunities. In most cases, due to the lack of opportunities, there is an increase in dropout rates and criminal activity, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Bryan, 2017; Grace & Nelson, 2019).

Research has investigated poverty, behavioral engagement, and systematic school placement issues regarding the achievement levels of students (Paschall et al., 2018; Plucker & Peters, 2018). When schools address this problem, academic performance will improve and there will be more advanced educational opportunities for African American students, lowering institutionalized barriers (Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2008).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this single-case study was to explore upper-elementary African American students' perceptions of effective motivational and instructional strategies in an eastern North Carolina private school. The motivational needs of African American students can be generally defined as supportive contexts for development that provide conditions that build students'

adaptive capacities, meeting the students basic psychological needs and supporting their mental health (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The theory that guided this study was STD (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which offers insight into the motivational aspect of children and how to sustain this culture through autonomy, competency, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Significance of the Study

This study was significant in three aspects: empirical, theoretical, and practical. By focusing on the teachers' use of instructional strategies, I hope that the motivation and self-determination of African American students will be the impetus to improve their life outcome, avoiding the perpetuation of the statistics that exhibit the negative impacts of academic achievement gaps. Subsequently, this one change could contribute to further changes in school systems.

Empirical Significance

The African American achievement gap has been investigated by multiple researchers (Bowman et al., 2018; Darensbourg & Blake, 2013; Dixson & Stevens, 2018), focusing on discipline, poverty, and discrimination (in some cases), but the gap persists (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Paschall et al., 2018). The research has also investigated the motivation of African American students relating to the hiring and staffing of institutions (Baker, 2005; Horowitz & Samuels, 2017; Jenkins, 2011). However, because of the achievement gap, there is a severe need for teachers' use of instructional strategies to motivate students in the classroom (Bryan, 2017; Paschall et al., 2018; Plucker & Peters, 2018). My study has empirical significance because only minimal research has been conducted on this topic (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006; Thomas, 2019). Although researchers explored the achievement gap, there was little to no

research on teachers' instructional strategies that motivated African American students (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008).

Theoretical Significance

The framework for this research was SDT, which utilizes empirical methods to explore social contextual variables and their impact on internal and behavioral processes (Ryan & Deci, 2000), posits that competence, relatedness, and autonomy are basic psychological needs that must be met to foster self-determination for internalization and intrinsic motivation to begin (Gagné & Deci, 2005). SDT has frequently been used in education, emphasizing students' inherent motivational propensities for learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Adopting this theory for this study added to the understanding and viability of SDT for investigation into African American issues, including motivation.

Practical Significance

This study examines teaching strategies and how they address the motivational needs of students. The emotional care of students impacts the academic wellness of children. Many conditions affect a student's performance, such as poverty and social disadvantages (Rothstein, 2015); therefore, when students receive the social and emotional support that they need, they are more likely to be college or career ready and to graduate. The practical significance of this study will be a cause for reflection among teachers, administrators, and district-level administrators.

Although teachers may not receive explicit instruction on how to reach their students in a way that will engage them with content, teachers should strive to engage and motivate all students. This study aimed to delve into culturally responsive teaching to further engage students in the classroom. Culturally responsive teaching is an urgent need since the African American academic gap has not narrowed much since the 1970s.

Research Questions

Qualitative questions are often open and nondirectional (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The questions are typically three to five in number, with one central question and a few sub-questions that begin with *how* or *what* (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hence, the following central question and three sub-questions frame this research topic.

Central Question

According to upper-elementary African American students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to improve the motivation of African American students within the classroom?

Autonomy, relativeness, and confidence are three psychological needs that motivate students (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Meeting these needs is essential for constructive social development and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are met, students feel comfortable and safe to engage and grapple with content in class, which in turn will sharpen their critical thinking skills, and this will move them toward college and career readiness.

Sub-question 1

According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at Center of Excellence to foster autonomy among African American students?

Autonomy only works when students have choices and options. SDT suggests that when individuals choose, they will take ownership of the activity, resulting in enhanced intrinsic motivation (Reeve, Nix, & Hamm, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Sub-question 2

According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to foster relatedness among African American students?

As cited in Ryan and Deci (2000), studies have revealed that humans respond better with a sense of belonging and connection. This question revealed the relationships that the students have made or the lack thereof due to instruction. When students can form connections with others in the classroom, they are able to find comfort in interacting and engaging with content in a way that they cannot when a space does not feel inclusive.

Sub-question 3

According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to help African American students become competent?

Competence is an essential factor in intrinsic motivation. Teachers must understand the timing of assessment and ensure that students understand the material, or else they will be in danger of being partially motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students have a higher likelihood of success when the skills and content covered during explicit instruction in the classroom are what is being assessed. In this way, students feel prepared for assessments and feel competent going into assessments knowing what was covered during instruction.

Definitions

1. *Achievement gap* – disparities in achievement between ethnic groups, socioeconomic statuses, and various subgroups (Paschall et al., 2018)
2. *Perception* – the way in which people notice and receive messages with their senses (Ou, 2017)
3. *Behavioral engagement* – the amount of effort an individual puts forth toward academic tasks through persistence, concentration, and interest characterize (Darensbourg & Blake, 2013)
4. *Motivation* – intrinsic impetus that causes a person to act or behave (Thomas et al., 2009)

5. *Autonomy* – initiative and ownership in one's actions (Ryan & Deci, 2020)
6. *Relatedness* – a sense of belonging that brings connection within a community (Ryan & Deci, 2020)
7. *Competence* – mastery of a skill, which will give individuals a sense that they can succeed or grow (Ryan & Deci, 2020)

Summary

This chapter detailed the research study exploring teachers' use of instructional strategies that attend to the motivational needs of African American students. The problem was that teachers are neglecting to meet the motivational needs of African American students through their instruction (Thomas, 2019). The purpose of this single-case study was to explore upper-elementary African American students' perceptions of effective motivational and instructional strategies in an eastern North Carolina private school. SDT was the framework for this study, and interviews with the students generated accurate information concerning the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The answers to these questions shed light on the academic gaps. This study offers insight to all stakeholders and has an impact on a growing issue in education. Apathy is a major issue among minorities, contributing to the negative achievement trend (Thompson & Allen, 2012). Countering apathy through motivational techniques could change the trajectory of schools nationwide. This study offers a perspective on and a context for STD for the benefit of teachers and other stakeholders.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this single-case study was to explore upper-elementary African American students' perceptions of effective motivational and instructional strategies in an eastern North Carolina private school. The first section of this chapter explores and connects the study with the theoretical framework—Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory. The second section surveys the related literature.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that grounded this research study was SDT as developed by Deci and Ryan (1985). In addressing motivation and personality for success and engagement, SDT is not merely concerned with positive developmental tendencies but also examines the social environments antagonistic toward these tendencies (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory was the appropriate theoretical framework for this study because it focuses on motivation and how self-determination is a byproduct of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. SDT explores the ways extrinsic motivations affect a person as well as a person's inherent human needs and intrinsic motivations. Thomas et al. (2009) defined motivation as "a phenomenon by which internal drives lead to an action or behavior" (p. 160). Three elements emerge that define the pathway to internal motivation and personality: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Based on this theory, if autonomy, competence, and relatedness go unsupported, it will have a significant impact on students' motivation. Subsequently, when a student is in an environment where competence, relatedness, and autonomy are met, the result is growth, integration for social development, and personal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020).

Autonomy is the freedom and independence of one's will and is a choice in a student's learning process (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Autonomy will help students take ownership of what they learn, resulting in enhanced intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Therefore, teachers need to give students opportunities to decide and understand the dynamics of interpersonal structures. Gray, Hope, and Matthews (2018) stated, "From an SDT perspective, providing interpersonal opportunity structures in an instructional setting helps students internalize important academic values and subsequently to gain more intrinsic motivational beliefs and behaviors" (p. 99).

Relatedness concerns fostering students' sense of belonging and connection (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Relatedness is made possible by creating environments that convey support, care, and respect (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Fostering this sense of belonging will engage students in the curriculum and content because of the relationships they have built, simultaneously decreasing misbehavior. Byrd and Chavous (2011) found that when African American students felt a sense of belonging, they had a similar status to other racial groups, including positive interactions and increased academic performance.

Competence concerns the mastery of content and whether students can succeed and grow (Ryan & Deci, 2020). For students to desire and attain competence, there should be structured environments that are challenging (Ryan & Deci, 2020). If the goal is to foster appropriate internalizations, these environments should be developmentally appropriate, which will lead to intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence is a possible byproduct of positive feedback and opportunities for growth (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Streb et al. (2015) conducted a study that found that children who emphasized social relatedness showed higher heart rates and emotional stimuli, indicating greater engagement.

Gray et al. (2018) emphasized that a supportive environment fosters a connection between the students and the socializing agent. These researchers contended that interpersonal relationships create a positive atmosphere for students, taking further strides towards social and academic competencies. Additionally, for African American students to own the shared space of the school, the shared environment must be honorable to African Americans' heritage and culture, according to Gray et al. (2018), who explored how race-based perspectives can be used as tools to provide opportunities to create a sense of belonging in schools for students. Honoring African American students and connecting the academic content to their experiences will cause something powerful to happen; students will share and see a personal investment in the learning (King, 2006). When one's culture meets the world of academics, this creates a sense of belonging.

Intrinsic and extrinsic influences can activate motivation. Intrinsic motivation pertains to students doing things for their own enjoyment or inherent interest. Extrinsic motivation concerns behaviors done for reasons other than inherent personal satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2020). For students, extrinsic motivation alone will not foster long-lasting academic success (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Giving students choices in their education, acknowledging feelings, and opportunities for self-direction prove to increase intrinsic motivation, yielding greater academic outputs for students (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Related Literature

The achievement gap between African American students and White students has been an issue for several decades (Paschall et al., 2018). The current educational statistics for African Americans reveal a problem that is plaguing this group of individuals, as they underperform academically compared to Whites and other minorities (Bowman et al., 2018). Many factors

contribute to the achievement gap, including poverty (Paschall et al., 2018), discrimination (Assari & Caldwell, 2018), and disproportionate discipline practices (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). The related literature further explores the initiatives that have been implemented to help educators navigate the current negative narrative of African American academic performance.

Current Educational Statistics for African Americans

The NAEP assessment, which is administered every two years to fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade students, is the largest representative assessment that measures trends in academic achievement in various subjects across the United States. African American students' assessment scores were lower across all subjects than those of White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017, 2019). In 2019, only 18% of African American fourth-grade students either achieved NAEP proficiency levels or scored above proficiency levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019, 2019). In the same year, 15% of African American eighth-grade students met or exceeded NAEP proficiency levels, and 17% of African American twelfth-grade students met or exceeded NAEP proficiency levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), African American students performed lower than White students in both reading and math assessments. For the reading national assessment, the national average score for all fourth-grade students was 222. The average reading score for fourth-grade African American students was 206 compared to White fourth graders' average score of 232. The eighth-grade national average score was 267. African American eighth-grade students scored an average of 249, compared to White eighth graders' average score of 275. Twelfth graders scored a national average of 285, African

American twelfth-grade students scored an average of 249 compared to their White counterparts, who scored an average of 295. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017, 2019)

According to National Center for Education Statistics (2019), African American fourth-grade students' national average reading score was 204 compared to 230 for White students. African American eighth-grade students' average reading score was 244 compared to White students' average score of 272. For twelfth graders, African American students' average score was 262 compared to White students' score of 295. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019)

There was also an achievement gap in the 2019 math scores (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Overall, fourth-grade students achieved a national average score of 241. White fourth-grade students scored an average of 249, while African American students scored a 224. Eighth-grade students achieved a national average score of 282, with White students' average score being 292 and that of African American students 260. Twelfth-grade students achieved a national average score of 150, with White students exceeding the national average at 159 and African American students averaging a score of 128 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

The discourse about these academic achievement disparities has centered on a cultural deficit framework that considers socioeconomic status and the negative perception and prejudices against African American students (Bowman et al., 2018; Rothstein, 2015; Wasserberg, 2017). Negative perceptions of African American students based on assessment performance can be harmful when school culture and environment are not taken into consideration as contributing factors (Wasserberg, 2017). Instructional models based on tests

have led teachers to develop negative stereotypes of African American students and to underestimate their abilities and skills (Wasserberg, 2017).

African American students score lower in assessments and grades, which may put them at a disadvantage for high school graduation and college enrollment. This may result in a higher high school dropout rates among African American students. Of the African American students enrolled in Grades 10 and 12 in October 2015, 5.9% dropped out of high school by the following year. For White students, however, only 4.5% of students dropped out of high school during the same time. In 2016, 6.2% of African Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 did not hold a high school diploma nor were they enrolled in school, compared to their White counterparts, 5.2% of whom were not enrolled in school nor held a diploma. However, the dropout rate for African American students has decreased significantly; in 2000, 13.1% of African American students did not hold a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school, which means the 2016 high school dropout rate was half of the 2000 dropout rate among African American students. (Taylor, Kyere, & King, 2021)

African American Barriers to Motivation

Extensive research has explored achievement gaps in three categories: race, ethnicity, and economic status (Paschall et al., 2018). African American students from low-income areas do not have equal access to educational resources compared to their more affluent counterparts (Rothstein, 2015). Additionally, low-income African American students are not only plagued with possible discriminatory practices but also experience the disadvantage of lack of resources and access to resources (Bowman et al., 2018). Plucker and Peters (2016) mention that in order for students to advance in education, they need the following from education institutions and school districts: strong communication, belief and acceptance, and limited barriers to access.

Poverty

There are many theories concerning the causes of the persistent academic achievement gap between African Americans and Whites. However, poverty is the common denominator of all the indicators of students who lag behind academically (Ramseth, 2018). Poverty is an issue that impacts all races; however, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (2017), African Americans have a higher rate of poverty than other groups. Poverty manifests itself differently, presenting educators and students with varying challenges and requiring different responses (Owens, 2018). Educators cannot change the economic statuses of students or the challenges they experience due to resource constraints. However, educators can potentially empower students to rise above poverty by being role models, creating relationships, and enhancing emotional support to students (Ramseth, 2018). According to Ramseth (2018), several factors are crucial to mitigating the effect of poverty, including the educator's ability to create and maintain warm relationships, increasing the value of education, and participating in recreational and service-oriented activities. Poverty creates obstacles through a lack of communication, places extra stress on parents and students, and impacts their physical and mental health (Matthew, Rodrigues, & Reeves, 2016).

Paschall et al. (2018) conducted a study comparing the economic status of Whites, African Americans, and Hispanics, connecting it to the historical academic achievement gaps through analyzing 20 years of math and reading achievement across groups. The conclusion was that the gaps between poor White and poor African Americans grew during those two decades, while the gap between poor Whites and Hispanics narrowed. The researchers also noted that policies targeting the Black and White achievement gap must include economic supports; considering the increase in segregated housing, there should be intentional investment in quality

instructional curriculum and school resources (Paschall et al., 2018). Lastly, the researchers argue that there should be a focus on equity (Paschall et al., 2018).

Poverty impacts African American students' social and emotional energy (Naser & Dever, 2019). For some, dysfunctional behaviors such as abuse or neglect are normal for households in poverty. Consequently, these children enter "fight or flight" mode, where they do not know how to enter or thrive in nurturing environments (Naser & Dever, 2019). In some cases, because of poverty, students can display signs of aggression and a loss of impulse control, shunning nurturing environments (Bowman et al., 2018). Instead of dealing with issues appropriately, African American students impacted by poverty may turn to violence (Bowman et al., 2018), which in turn perpetuates the cycle and can possibly lead to suspension, expulsion, inability to complete high school, and eventually low-paying jobs; the result is perpetual poverty (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019). Plucker and Peters (2018) reported that intentional communication concerning violence and safety from the district and state levels should explain and afford parents the opportunities to know requirements to help their children achieve excellence.

Discrimination

Discrimination is a negative behavior or an act of prejudice against people of different ethnicities and races because of their social group membership (Craighead & Nemeroff, 2004). Discrimination in any school system marginalizes students and removes equal access to academic support and opportunities compared to their counterparts. When Assari and Caldwell (2018) used a survey to study the effect of teacher discrimination on African American students' school performance, the findings revealed an indirect correlation between teacher discrimination and lower school performance among African American boys and girls. Assari and Caldwell (2018) found that males and females reported similar levels of perceived teacher discrimination.

The researchers concluded that African Americans tend to experience psychological distress due to discrimination and other environmental stressors. Although multiple pieces of legislations have been put in place to alleviate discrimination and its impact, researchers argued that existing policies still need to be reinforced (Assari & Caldwell, 2018). These researchers concluded that teachers have allowed stereotypes to negatively impact how they grade and treat African American students in comparison to their counterparts (Assari & Caldwell, 2018).

In another study, Wang and Huguley (2012) examined the impact of racial discrimination in schools and racialized parental socialization practices on the outcomes of African American adolescents. Wang and Huguley (2012) recruited participants through letters and completed face-to-face interviews with 630 African American adolescents. After data analysis, they concluded that teacher discriminatory practices had a significant impact on the educational success of African American students and that teacher discrimination has more negative effects than peer discrimination on the academic outcomes of African American youth (Wang & Huguley, 2012). Neblett et al. (2006) revealed that there would most likely be adverse academic outcomes in the face of discrimination. Further, positive messages about the self may contribute to a student persevering in the face of discrimination or racial injustices. These positive messages caused an increase in persistence and self-efficacy (Neblett et al., 2006).

Butler-Barnes and Inniss-Thompson (2020) completed a study examining perceived teacher discrimination on the school discipline of African American and Caribbean Black adolescent girls. In their study, participants were interviewed and asked to complete the School Bonding Scale to assess perceived discrimination (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). These researchers found that African American and Caribbean Black girls are impacted by perceived discrimination in school. First, once the girls perceive discrimination from their

teachers, they were more likely to experience suspension, expulsion, jail time, or time at the detention center (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). The researchers drew two important conclusions. First, positive relationships with teachers and staff enhance the psychological well-being of students; when administration and staff have healthy work relationships, they can easily collaborate on how to best serve students successfully. School bonding is a positive instrument that can combat the discrimination issues that may be prevalent in a school (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). Second, perceived discrimination strongly correlates with African Americans' academic outcomes (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020).

Banerjee, Byrd, and Rowley (2018) investigated whether ethnic-racial socialization could deescalate perceived racial discrimination and academic outcomes. According to their research, students who experienced more peer discrimination reported lower academic persistence (Banerjee et al., 2018). Banerjee et al. (2018) found that teachers believed that African Americans were aggressive and had anti-intellectual mindsets, leading and perpetuating anti-growth for African American students. Some of these stereotypes are engrained in society and are present in educational institutions (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019).

Borman, Grigg, Rozek, Hanselman, and Dewey (2018) conducted a study in which seventh-grade students in 11 schools completed writing exercises designed to promote values affirmation. According to the researchers, frequently, when African Americans engage in an intellectual or explicitly scholastic task, they are susceptible to confirming or judging society's negative stereotypes, consisting of suspicion of their group's competence and intellectual capability (Borman et al., 2018). Stereotyping interferes with the academic ability and outcome of African American students (Borman et al., 2018). Borman et al. (2018) concluded that self-affirmation positively impacts minorities even if they may be subject to stereotypical threats.

According to Whaley (2018), stereotype threats affect students' academic performance, particularly African Americans in all areas in the academic context.

Stereotyping

Students who perceive themselves as belonging to a group known to perform poorly in academics feel inferior (McGee, 2018). Stereotypes are overgeneralized beliefs that are often negative, and these beliefs can also substantially affect most students' activities in the classroom (Luo, So, Wan, & Li, 2021). Additionally, stereotyped individuals may develop self-handicapping, self-suppression, and challenge avoidance (Merillat, Corrigan, & Harper, 2018). Furthermore, stereotyped individuals are also highly susceptible to worse academic outcomes and social distancing due to stigmatization.

Kellow and Jones (2008) studied the effects of stereotypes on the achievement gap for African American high school students. There are several mediators of stereotype threat, however, in this study the researcher narrowed the factors to how students approach academic goals, their expectations for success, and anxiety. They found that African Americans are at a greater disadvantage in comparison to their White counterparts when high-stakes standardized tests are used to measure knowledge and skills. Kellow and Jones (2008) concluded that certain environmental and cognitive phenomena associated with high-stakes testing have a negative impact on the performance of African American students. This study shows that stereotypes can lead to discriminatory practices and expectations, causing a negative effect for students of color.

Discipline

Discipline in the classroom impacts students' overall success (Gregory et al., 2016). Unfair discipline practices can foster an environment that creates barriers for African American students to learn in the classroom because students will lose instructional time in class, become discouraged, fall behind in course work, and possibly drop out of school (Gregory et al., 2016; Johnson, Anhalt, & Cowan, 2018). Negative preconceived ideas toward African Americans may cause teachers to be less tolerant of students of color and to inevitably push them out of the learning environment through unfair treatment and suspension (Fenning & Rose, 2007). These preconceived ideas cause students to be perceived as not fitting into the norms of the school, resulting in their being and sent home or separated, even if the infractions were minimal (Fenning & Rose, 2007).

Generally, discipline practices in schools are disproportionately enacted against African American students more than any other group (Smolkowski, Girvan, Mcintosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016). According to Smolkowski et al. (2016), African American males receive severer punishment than Whites. African American girls are seven times more likely to be suspended from school and three times more likely to have in-school suspension than White females (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). In high school, 23% of African American students were suspended compared to 7% of White students (Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015). Butler-Barnes and Inniss-Thompson (2020) noted that exclusionary discipline separates the child from the regular educational environment and directly correlates with long-term educational outcomes, such as lower test scores, involvement with the juvenile system, and dropping out of high school.

Gregory and Fergus (2017) found situations where students disrupt their classroom and are defiant can be traced to teacher-student relationship failures. This impacts discipline and

academic achievement. Teachers are the catalyst for change in schools; therefore, Gregory and Fergus (2017) proposed a plan of action involving increased use of socioemotional learning. These researchers detailed two competencies that teachers should develop—social awareness and relationship skills. Social awareness is the ability to consider and empathize with diversities of culture, which helps teachers not to devalue the culture and the experiences of African American students (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gregory & Roberts, 2017). Relationship skills are abilities that are employed to create a positive environment, interaction, or outcome between teachers and students (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gregory & Roberts, 2017). When a teacher has social awareness and relationship skills, it can enhance the way they discipline children. Consequently, devaluing an individual's culture will not foster a sense of belonging or relatedness, which is a psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Gregory et al. (2016) studied discipline, teacher preparation, and professional development. These researchers implemented the My Teacher Partner program, which paired teachers with instructional coaches as a mentoring program for teachers earlier in their careers to receive support from educators who have been in the field longer. Furthermore, instructional coaches used the Classroom Assessment Scoring System-Secondary to target the quality of teacher-student relationships and interactions while guiding teachers in creating emotionally positive, motivational, and challenging classrooms to appeal to the students' socioemotional and academic needs. They analyzed discipline data from various classrooms and found that mentoring and coaching from veteran and more experienced teachers reduce the racial discipline gap (Gregory et al., 2016). This study confirmed the need for teacher training and development related to discipline.

Fenning and Rose (2007) explored the overrepresentation of African American students in exclusionary discipline and its correlation to the school-to-prison pipeline. These researchers advocated for continual professional development in disciplinary practices for teachers at the schoolwide level (Fenning & Rose, 2007). A schoolwide development program would "spark critical reflection about one's own ethnic identity and the influence of cultural upbringings on attitudes toward other ethnic identity and racial groups and how these ideals impact their discipline regiment" (Fenning & Rose, 2007, p. 552). Providing instruction tailored to students' culture and intentionally fostering relationships should engage students, increase bonding and connectivity, and decrease unwanted classroom behaviors (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Instructional Differentiation

Instructional differentiation is the process by which a teacher tailors instruction in response to students' needs (Doubet & Hockett, 2017). It entails scaffolded questioning in lesson planning and anticipating student responses to content to strengthen engagement. According to Carson (2020), differentiated instruction has been crucial for balancing equity in learning opportunities so that students are equipped to achieve their learning goals and master the content. The differentiated approach is learner-centered because students play a critical role by taking ownership of their learning (Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018). Learner-centered activities motivate students to develop independence, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018). Differentiated instruction that considers individual students' learning needs is necessary for African Americans because of various cultural barriers and cultural expectations (Green, Ammah, Butler-Byrd, Brandon, & McIntosh, 2017). Additionally,

autonomy is a by-product of differentiation, as students receive independent personalized learning, fostering a sense of autonomy and choice.

Identifying the students for whom an educational approach may be successful is critical when closing achievement gaps (Taylor, 2017). According to Atlay (2019), the quality of teaching can eliminate achievement disparities, whether through quality curriculum development or quality classroom delivery. Based on Brevik, Gunnulfsen, and Renzulli (2018), educators involved in curriculum development must consider the academic needs and the different experiences of students from varying backgrounds; this is done by having informal meetings and building quality relationships with each child.

Bondie, Dahnke, and Zusho (2019) reviewed the ways US-based research between 2001 and 2015 described, defined, and measured how teaching has changed to implement differentiated instruction in classrooms. One of the changes implemented included the Response to Intervention, a multitiered approach to instructional problem-solving based on scientific interventions with consequential monitoring of student achievement (Bondie et al., 2019). Before No Child Left Behind (NCLB), differentiated instruction was a common practice, even being explored and discussed in a 1953 study (Bondie et al., 2019), the findings of which showed that there were varying teacher instruction practices related to differentiated instruction. These researchers also concluded that in every study, the teachers' goal was to maximize growth opportunities (Bondie et al., 2019). Furthermore, teachers' instructional decisions and strategic lesson planning can combat barriers that prohibit development (Bondie et al., 2019). It is evident from this study that collaboration is necessary to address and remedy the barriers of differentiation because addressing the African American achievement gap will be extremely difficult without tailored academic instruction. Smale-Jacobse, Meijer, Helms-Lorenz, and

Maulana (2019) stated that differentiated instruction provides educators with starting points for bridging the achievement gaps.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Johnson et al. (2018) contended that there needed to be schoolwide positive behavior interventions to address the disproportionality in discipline with African American students. Johnson et al. (2018) advocated for culturally responsive teaching because of high discipline disparities and cultural misunderstandings among African American students. Culturally responsive teaching is instruction and interactions that have the student's culture in mind. To implement culturally responsive teaching, instructors should intentionally integrate the student's culture, fostering respect and a sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2018). Consequently, Johnson et al. (2018) advocated replacing zero-policy decisions in the classroom and school with active development and a comprehensive understanding of culture and culturally responsive practices as well as intentional planning that includes a student's culture. Johnson et al. (2018) concluded that teachers should change their classroom management style from disciplinary interventions to a focus on rewarding positive behavior while incorporating a culturally responsive framework to address behavior and other cultural differences. Johnson et al. (2018) argued that the classroom should be the center and the focal point of change.

Gregory and Roberts (2017) advocated for socioemotional competencies alongside culturally responsive teaching in the classroom for African American students to succeed. They discussed the importance of understanding the tone and culture of African Americans, which may be perceived as aggression and a precursor to physical altercations. Administrators and those who create local school policy should dismantle lasting disciplinary consequences for low-level infractions. Students should have time and space to learn content and behavioral

expectations. Modeling expectations and feedback should be constant for all students (Lane, Kalberg, & Menzies, 2009). Applying culturally responsive teaching will lead to a diverse and respectful community. This teaching method can help students to develop intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which are foundational for self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2020)

School disciplinary practices have a significant impact on a students' academic success. Discriminatory disciplinary practices against students can perpetuate systemic oppressive cycles for African American students (Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2017). Green et al. (2017) conducted a study that addressed the education pipeline for African American students. The researchers argued that African American students enter less prepared than their counterparts and advocated for a mentorship program that would address the educational disparities and increase the chances of success among African American students. In this study, the researchers created a mentorship program for African American students to enhance retention and designed to address the pipeline cracks: barriers, racism and discrimination, alienation and isolation, and lack of educational access. (Green et al., 2017) The researchers concluded that African American students are more likely to be academically successful when placed in a supportive and healthy community environment, thus increasing retention rates for African Americans in college (Green et al., 2017). The researchers further contended that African American students in predominately White institutions should have a role model within a mentorship program who can help them navigate challenges (Green et al., 2017).

Teachers who are representative of a school's student population demographics can relate to the students they serve. Acosta (2018) conducted a qualitative research study to determine the need for African American educators in the schools. According to the researcher, schools should increase a sense of belonging by employing educators who represent the students. They believed

that African American students in urban settings can grow, display quality learning, and become competitive worldwide. However, overrepresentation in remedial and special education programs and the dissonance of the overarching discipline issues have hindered and stagnated academic gains (Acosta, 2018). This study revealed that African American educators expressed a sense of urgency about educating African American students to eliminate negative perceptions and harmful depictions (Acosta, 2018). African American teachers and staff members are necessary since they fortify a maternal or paternal role. Consequently, when African American students experience the presence of African American teachers, they thrive on meeting the teacher's expectations, achieving intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Carrol (2017) advocated for culturally responsive pedagogy, using African American epistemology as a foundation and frame to support urban educators. Carrol (2017) argued that society recognized African American teachers for their success in working with African American students. However, the researcher claimed that the desegregation of 1954 hurt African Americans professionally and, for the most part, removed their presence from the education environment (Carrol, 2017). The researcher also implied that there needs to be an understanding of the implementation of care in schools, holding that there is a significant difference between authentic and aesthetic caring (Carrol, 2017). The latter will produce school-oriented results, while the former will produce communal and whole-child transformation, causing students to reciprocate because of trust (Carrol, 2017). When placed in an environment where cultures are shared, African Americans are more likely to succeed (Carrol, 2017). Contrary to the preconceived thoughts about African Americans on African American instruction, the findings reveal that African American teachers alone are not the answer to failing educational systems (Carrol, 2017). African American teachers today are from different educational and

socioeconomic backgrounds. School systems should not depend on hiring more African American teachers as the only remedy but should focus on social and behavioral skills that are not borne out of harmful stereotypes against African American students (Carrol, 2017).

To investigate culturally responsive teaching, Lambeth and Smith (2016) conducted a study of students in a master of education program, pre-service teachers who completed a questionnaire responding to their own culturally responsive teaching. The researchers were advocates for culturally responsive teaching and argued that educators would be more effective in teaching students with the same or similar cultures. Consequently, the researchers call for teachers to gain a repertoire of skills, training, knowledge strategies, and abilities to effectively teach all students. At the end of the study, it was evident that the participants needed experienced teachers as models to show them how to reach non-Caucasian students (Lambeth & Smith, 2016). The researchers concluded that without this training, the cycle of discriminatory practices would continue, damaging the hopes and dreams of African American students (Lambeth & Smith, 2016).

Mindset Intervention

Motivation, academic engagement, and achievement goals can mitigate the effects of stereotyping (Borman, 2017). When students believe negative stereotypes about themselves and each other, this can lead to a lack of confidence in the classroom. According to Claro, Paunesku, and Dweck (2016), students who believe that their intellectual capabilities can develop (growth mindset) and perform better than those who think that their intellectual abilities are immutable (fixed mindset). When addressing psychological interventions for developing a growth mindset during transitions to high school, Yeager et al. (2016) stated that students can be motivated to learn. Encouraging students to have a growth mindset is not an obstacle to instruction, resources,

or pedagogies. Educators can have more significant impacts and significantly improve their achievements by addressing how students view the school and themselves, including their abilities and experiences in school (Yeager et al., 2016). Although a temporary measure, educators can incorporate a growth mindset into school culture. For instance, strategies that make students feel safe, connected, and valued promote a growth mindset in all students (Fraser, 2018).

Orosz, Péter-Szarka, Bőthe, Tóth-Király, and Berger (2017), who conducted a mindset intervention among students who earned high grades, argued that students who doubt their abilities or have a bad experience with a grade would attribute this as an overall failure or inability in a particular subject. Orosz et al. (2017) concluded that growth mindsets connect to environments and settings, and students can change their initial mindset in a beneficial direction. Mindset intervention sets the progress towards recursive processes that eventually alter the students' achievement path because they believe that intelligence is a malleable quality (DeBacker et al., 2018). The goal of mindset interventions is to convince students that instead of becoming finite and fixed, intelligence can mature; therefore, when challenged, students will not quit but persist through a task. Students are coached and given a path of thinking, ultimately helping them perform better and achieve academic success by working harder (DeBacker et al., 2018).

Claro et al. (2016) investigated how a student's growth mindset weakens the impact of low socioeconomic statuses on educational success in Chile. In this study, 10th-grade students completed a survey (Claro et al., 2016) in which researchers found a strong correlation between socioeconomic statuses, academic performance, and fixed mindsets. Chilean students were twice as likely to have a fixed mindset as the highest-income students (Claro et al., 2016). When

students suffer from economic challenges, it can suppress their academic performance in many ways, such as increased academic stress, inadequate access to academic resources, and nutritional and other healthcare factors (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018). However, teachers can lessen the impact of poverty by influencing the students' beliefs, such as loss of control.

Broda et al. (2018) found that growth mindset interventions positively affect grades among racial/ethnic minority students. When students believe that they can succeed, they are more likely to be academically successful. Furthermore, mindset intervention among African American students positively affected their test scores and increased the identification and engagement with the school. According to Broda et al. (2018), mindset interventions enhance belongingness and uncertainty. Belongingness and uncertainty interventions seek to mute minority students' worries about fitting in as normal instead of perceiving that they do not belong or cannot succeed. The goal of mindset interventions is not to be a temporary fix but a permanent way for students to think (Broda et al., 2018).

Mosanya (2021) explored whether a growth mindset could act as a protective factor against academic distress during the Covid-19 pandemic for international students in isolation. Mosanya (2021) argued that a growth mindset cultivates the assumption that basic qualities are those that the students can realize merely by their efforts. Mosanya (2021) surveyed undergraduate international students, measuring their academic stress, implicit theories of intelligence, grit, perceived lack of control, and loneliness. Mosanya (2021) noted that social distance, loneliness, and perceived lack of control academically impact a student's academic performance. The researcher's findings suggested that grit and growth mindset, as dynamic variables, can help build resilience and decrease academic stress (Mosanya, 2021).

Students can achieve support through psychological processes that enhance self-affirmation, including values affirmation. Although self-affirmation and values affirmation interventions may not directly affect the student's performance, they may influence African American students' beliefs about their identities (Borman et al., 2018). Changing the students' perceptions about their ability to succeed regardless of their resource needs, family, and cultural background are foundational interventions for academic success (Goyer et al., 2017). Ideally, support can be psychological to eliminate barriers to academic success, especially during transition stages. Additionally, affirmation requires intentionality and highly trained educators (Borman et al., 2018). The implication is that schools, universities, and colleges must be equipped with academic resources ranging from personnel to materials for teaching pedagogies that actively practice affirmation and then evaluate its effectiveness on student impact. The researchers concluded that there is evidence that brief self-affirmation exercises can have substantial effects on students at little to no cost. Additionally, Borman et al. (2018) concluded that local administrators should consider implementing schoolwide strategies surrounding affirmation to address the African American achievement gap.

Charter Schools

The underlying factor associated with the lack of support and satisfaction is that students at risk of falling into the achievement gap need more structural help, such as charter schools (Ballen, Wieman, Salehi, Searle, & Zamudio, 2017). US charter schools usually function with autonomy from the conventional school districts. Charter schools have flexibility in their curriculum and school structure; are held accountable by state education agencies, school districts, or assigned boards depending on the state; and perform like traditional public schools (Ballen et al., 2017). However, urban charter schools with a student body of minority and lower-

income students often operate with a no-excuses philosophy, which can produce the most benefits for their students (Cohodes, 2018). According to Wilson (2009), “no excuses” is composed of four characteristics: driven and highly-qualified teachers leading their students into rigorous instruction aligned with state standards and preparing them for college, teachers communicating high expectations for their students and rejecting explanations for low achievement, a more extended school day with viable parent and teacher contact, and school- and network-wide discipline systems.

Charter schools following “no excuses” intensively focus on raising their students’ proficiency and math scores even though many come from lower-income and racial minority populations (Lopez Kershen, Weiner, & Torres, 2018). Many charter schools function in a deliberate attempt to narrow the achievement gap for students of color (Stahl, 2020). Lopez Kershen et al. (2018) concluded that the “no excuse” charter schools emphasize and embrace a college-prep culture, advocating for students to enroll in college.

Stahl (2020) analyzed the corporeal curriculum employed in charter schools. The corporeal curriculum focuses on maintaining the body control of students, leading to a more controlled academic environment (Stahl, 2020). According to the researcher, charter schools mainly foster higher academic expectations among their student population to prepare the students for college. Stahl (2020) further concluded that corporeal curriculum is a pseudo solution to the underachievement of African Americans in a charter school, giving solid sentiments to other social interactions responsible for the lower socioeconomic African Americans moving into higher socioeconomic status (Stahl, 2020).

Lopez Kershen et al. (2018) focused on how early career charter schoolteachers employ the “no excuses” approach between teachers and students. Lopez Kershen et al. (2018)

conducted a qualitative study in which 20 teachers utilized the “no excuses” discipline approach with their students, ultimately shifting the teachers’ role into an emphasis on rules and staff control versus care and relationship building. Eliminating relationships with staff and stifling a sense of belonging impacted African American students’ learning by creating passive learners (Lopez Kershen et al., 2018).

Sondel (2016) stated that apart from their diversity in structures, private schools employ strict discipline and behavior codes, targeted instruction, and extended instructional time for lower-performing students. Despite the ethical considerations behind the pedagogical approaches of charter schools, establishing such effective charter schools can be a practical approach to closing the achievement gap (Cohodes, 2018). Also, traditional public schools that adopt charter school practices tend to produce significant academic gains for their students (Cohodes, 2018). However, in order to have a meaningful impact on the academic achievement gap, public schools will also need to adapt the approach employed by charter schools (Cohodes, 2018). Public schools should utilize the same interventions that work toward closing the achievement gap that charter schools use, not based on the type of school but focus on the interventions that have been proven effective.

Initiatives and Policies

The federal government enacted several legislative policies to combat the academic achievement gap for African American students, such as No Child Left Behind and ESSA (Heck & Chang, 2017). Although some of these policies were good in initiation, the educational system still struggled to close achievement gaps because state accountability and testing increased (Heck & Chang, 2017). Heck and Chang (2017) concluded in their study that educational policies can take decades of implementation and training before the true scope of impact becomes apparent.

No Child Left Behind

The inception of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, often called the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB), has been fundamental in improving education in schools serving students from minority populations (Hanushek et al., 2019). NCLB called for schools to strive for "adequate yearly progress." That meant schools were to strive for improvement in students' performance on standardization tests each year (i.e., the average test score should increase every year as should performance of demographic subgroups in the student body) (Hanushek et al., 2019). One of the methods used to achieve this progress has been encouraging teachers to continue using equitable pedagogies that benefit students from minority groups.

Harman, Boden, Karpenski, and Muchowicz (2016) evaluated the outcomes of the NCLB as implemented in Illinois. According to the researchers, students were proficient and competent in high-quality standards, indicating that students were receiving above par education. After the inception of the NCLB, the percentage of students enrolled in schools increased, and the overall performance improved. By 2014, 100% of students in all public schools in Illinois passed their state's standardized tests as provided by the NCLB Act (Harman et al., 2016).

Common Core and STEM

According to Henry and Stahl (2017), the Commo Core was established through the support of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief of State School Officers. The primary objective for developing the Common Core Standards was to increase student readiness for success by providing a common higher standard guiding K12 academic achievement. Emphasizing higher-order thinking skills and reflective inquiry, Common Core attempts to enhance proficiency in academic concepts (Kosko & Gao, 2017). Before the Common Core Initiative in 2005, many African Americans and other underrepresented

minorities were not graduating from high school and were not college or career ready (Equity Assistance Centers, 2013). According to Darling-Hammond (2018), student achievement annual performance is a critical state-level indicator of progress in the education sector. Therefore, the Council of Chief of State School Officers tracks and reports student achievement through state assessment scores.

After students took standardized tests, the scores revealed an achievement gap (Davis, 2019). The District of Columbia and many states, including North Carolina, have implemented the Common Core Standards to have a rigorous nationwide curriculum serving as an equalizer for lower-income students and potentially closing the academic achievement disparities. While the scores for African American and Native American students have been increasing, the gaps have also widened (Ostashevsky, 2016). The implication is that a rigorous curriculum only raised proficiency and student scores in standardized tests but has been slow in closing the academic achievement gap; therefore, Common Core is beneficial to all students and not just minorities (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2018).

However, the Equity Assistance Centers analysis (2013) states that Common Core promises success to all students, but only if delivered in a manner that directly addresses and resolves critical issues. For instance, the high-quality standards provided by the Common Core cannot serve as a privilege for only some students. They must be an absolute requirement for all students in all schools, calling for structural and economic support (Lee & Wu, 2017). The EAC project sees the positive outcomes of the implementation of Common Core, and it prompts policymakers and educators to approach Common Core through the lens of equity. More specifically, educators and policymakers addressing Common Core must at minimum reexamine their systems, procedures, policies, and practices and redirect them so that Common Core

delivers on leveled grounds for all students to expedite the closure of the achievement gap (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2018). Gagnon and Mattingly (2018) mention the exit of quality teachers from minority schools, thus implying that quality educators could somewhat alleviate some of the inequity in the achievement gap.

From another perspective, the representation of African Americans in the STEM workforce persistently remains disproportionately low for the US population. Based on Jordt et al. (2017), African Americans initially exhibit higher interest in majoring in STEM at the undergraduate level. Identifying and mitigating the challenges faced by students in underrepresented minorities has been a critical approach for increasing retention in STEM courses. According to Trenshaw, Targan, and Valles (2016), STEM retention is usually determined by students' performance in college courses. Another strategy that schools have used to increase the retention of minority populations in STEM classrooms is the integration of scientific-oriented classroom pedagogies that improve the student's overall academic performance, which may include active learning (Trenshaw et al., 2016).

Active learning reduces achievement gaps when combined with out-of-class learning using scientific approaches such as pre-class reading assignments and post-class review assignments (Brown, Steinberg, Lu, & Diekman, 2018). Based on Van Sickle et al. (2020), such teaching strategies could benefit African American students by leveling the field by explicitly modeling the skills required for students' success in STEM courses. Lisberg and Woods (2018) found that attrition from undergraduate programs (rather than a lack of interest or low recruitment among African American students) that accounts for their underrepresentation in STEM degrees. According to these researchers, strategies such as early familiarity with STEM and success in introductory courses are necessary for increasing retention (Lisberg & Woods,

2018). However, typical challenges for students in introductory STEM courses can be compounded for first-generation college students and minority students. These students are likely to perceive early setbacks as indicators of future failures (J. L. Young, J. R. Young, & Ford, 2019). According to Lowry and Thomas-Anderson (2017), support from other programs can enhance support from peers, increase mentorship and student motivation to participate in STEM courses, and enhance familiarity with university programs and faculty. Courses offered alongside STEM courses can also address students' growth mindset and introduce the effective theory, which involves teaching effective learning methods in STEM (Brown et al., 2018).

School Leadership, Teacher Effects, and Professional Development

Op-ed columnist for the *New York Times* David Brooks delved into the responsibilities of school principals in closing the achievement gap in his article "Good Learners Make Good Schools." Brooks (2018) states that student achievement can only be motivated by good leadership and that principals can build a positive school culture to support the development of the learner's mindset. Brooks (2018) further argues that students' mindsets are more powerful in determining their scores than demographics or home environment. School leadership is vital for creating an environment for flourishing—a collaborative working environment, centered around student achievement. Donohoo, Hattie, and Eeels (2018) present collective teacher efficacy as a shared belief that a positive collaboration among educators can improve student achievement. According to the researchers, it is important for teachers to have a positive perception of their schools, and this is interconnected and positively associated with student achievement.

When educators practice self-efficacy, the school culture transforms into beliefs that reflect high expectations. Therefore, educators are change agents, and their motivation can be directly translated into student motivation, concentration, and eventually success regardless of

socioeconomic status (Donohoo et al., 2018). In addition, educators control the narrative of the school (Kamm, 2018). The more the school culture encourages high expectations, the more achievement can be increased (Assari & Caldwell, 2018). Teachers can positively impact students and influence them to be good learners in subjects they lack interest in or perform poorly in (Lowry & Thomas-Anderson, 2017). Thus, students may develop a positive attitude toward education and thereby experience positive growth in achievement.

High-quality teachers are critical for closing the achievement gap (Lowry & Thomas-Anderson, 2017). Along with attempts to close the achievement gap, significant efforts have been directed towards educational reforms in teacher professional development and the quality of teaching and classroom delivery (Atlay, Tieben, Hillmert, & Fauth, 2019). Atlay et al. (2019), suggesting that the teacher's effect on student achievement may be substantial. Consistently exposing students to effective and trained educators can encourage students to overcome socioeconomic and demographic obstacles. Training educators enhances the quality of their teaching methods (Atlay et al., 2019).

Summary

The purpose of this single case-study was to explore upper-elementary African American students' perceptions of effective motivational and instructional strategies in an eastern North Carolina private school. This study included many aspects of motivation, which is defined as internal drives that cause one to act or behave (Thomas et al., 2009). African American students continue to experience a gap in their academic performance (Dixson & Stevens, 2018). Considering all the barriers in the African American community and the school, such as poverty, discipline practices, discrimination, and the lack of role models, SDT was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study.

African Americans face many barriers. Poverty has impacted African American students' mental and physical health (Matthew et al., 2016). Additionally, poverty has added another barrier to the cultural disconnections in schools. Educating staff on this battle will help staff members focus on the essential things. Support from the government and communities can alleviate this issue. Putting in place systems that are equity-driven is a must. Another remedy that can improve and remove barriers to education is creating autonomous learning environments (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Creating these moments for students will boost intrinsic motivation (Gray et al., 2018). Autonomous classroom environments will help students share and see a personal investment in the curriculum (King, 2006). Allowing students to own their assignments is a bonus for engagement and academic performance. It is also a bridge that overcomes cultural barriers and affords instructors opportunities to see through the eyes of the students.

Another barrier that plagues African American students during their educational journey is disproportionate discipline practices (Losen et al., 2015). Unconscious belief systems impact how teachers discipline in the classroom (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). Additionally, some of the misbehavior issues may be the fruit of poverty (Bowman et al., 2018). There is a severe need for teacher training and development related to cultural awareness (Gregory et al., 2016). Often, there is a misconception about behavior of African American students when it is only an expression of culture. Students should feel support from their teachers.

Support and cultural awareness promote self-determination and motivation because it helps African Americans have a sense of belonging; it does not alienate them from their culture (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Butler-Barnes and Inniss-Thompson (2020) explain how discriminatory practices have increased and contributed to disproportionate discipline practices. There is a connection between perceived discrimination impacting how students bond at school (Butler-

Barnes et al., 2018). Preconceived discriminatory thoughts act as barriers that keep teachers from building relationships with students, which in turn impacts the child's sense of belonging, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Teachers should strive to build strong relationships with students: the more positive connections, the more positive outcomes (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020).

There have been supports for African Americans in school systems. Johnson et al. (2018) strongly recommends that positive interventions for behaviors are an outdated expectation. Instead, there is a call for revamping the curriculum in the classroom. Increasing the number of African American role models in schools can counteract poor academic performance (Green et al., 2017). Teacher preparation is the support that African Americans can enormously benefit from, particularly training in culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy (Carrol, 2017; Lambeth & Smith, 2016).

Researchers have conducted studies to see how poverty has impacted the African American achievement gap (Matthew et al., 2016; Paschall et al., 2018), discipline (Gregory et al., 2016; Smolkowski et al., 2016), discrimination (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Wang & Huguley, 2012), and the lack of culturally responsive teaching (Acosta, 2018; Green et al., 2017), but there is a gap in the literature because researchers have not yet explored teachers' use of instructional strategies to motivate African American students.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this single-case study was to explore upper-elementary African American students' perceptions of effective motivational and instructional strategies in an eastern North Carolina. This chapter details the research methods and process of this study. It also explains the data collection, analysis, and interpretation, concluding with a review of the trustworthiness and ethical considerations for the data and research.

Design

Qualitative research is the process of addressing a problem by studying individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018), utilizing narratives or stories from individuals instead of numbers. Qualitative research is most appropriate when researchers study human problems by gathering data in a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research was the method chosen for this study because it allowed me to hear the narratives and responses from the participants and to interpret the data by recognizing patterns. Furthermore, the qualitative process allowed me to identify and document teaching strategies that motivated African American students.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a case study is a qualitative approach that investigates a real-life case over time through detailed data collection utilizing multiple sources of information and reporting a case description as well as case themes. This study was a single-case study, which is often termed a "within-site study" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 97). A single-case study method was appropriate because I investigated 12 elementary school-aged students in multiple classes in one school, focusing on teacher instructional practices that fostered motivation. I conducted this study using data from observations, document analysis, and interviews, collecting data from the participants and interviewing them to record their

experiences in the classroom and motivation inspired by their teachers' instructional strategies. The single-case study was appropriate because it allowed me the opportunity to collect, analyze, and form conclusions by studying the students at the single site (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Research Questions

Central Question

According to upper-elementary African American students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to improve the motivation of African American students within the classroom?

Sub-question 1

According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at Center of Excellence to foster autonomy among African American students?

Sub-question 2

According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at Center of Excellence to foster relatedness among African American students?

Sub-question 3

According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at Center of Excellence to help African American students become competent?

Setting

The setting of the study was at the Center of Excellence (pseudonym), a private faith-based school located in eastern North Carolina in the Pitt County school district. The student population is 96% African American and 4% White, while the teaching staff is 75% African American and 25% White. The school serves only males but the staff is 33% males and 67%

females. The school administrator, who is an African American male, oversees curriculum, budget, grant funding, and day-to-day operation. The school operates on a traditional school schedule but, unlike public schools, has the autonomy to adjust its curriculum and is held accountable by a school board. Funding for the school is private; therefore, the limitations on curriculum that exist for public schools are not an obstacle. Parents pay out of pocket for their students to attend, but grants from the state of North Carolina are available to parents who are economically challenged.

Several faith-based leaders established the Center of Excellence to create a viable option for addressing the community's educational needs in eastern North Carolina. This school currently serves grades K–6, with a current enrollment of 52 male students. The Center of Excellence has a very high percentage of African American students, the exact demographic that needed to address the research questions. Eastern North Carolina was selected as a geographical region because I spent my formative years in education in the area and currently reside there. I have observed firsthand the trends in rural schools, especially the plight of African American students in those schools.

Participants

The participants for this research study were determined by purposeful sampling. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative researchers should use purposeful sampling when choosing a target population in order to accurately inform the researcher about the research problem. I wanted to gather different perspectives within the population. To facilitate purposeful sampling, participants in the study had to be from nine to eleven years of age and to have attended the Center of Excellence for at least one year. All the students were African American males. Their race was self-disclosed, and their family structure and gender are not a factor since

the sample is all male. Due to the school's small population (52 students), I chose students from three grades (third, fourth, and fifth) to have enough participants.

Procedures

The school administrator granted permission for me to conduct this research at the school site and discussed this research study with the staff (Appendix A). After defending my proposal, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix E). Before beginning any steps in the research process, I verified clearance from the IRB through Liberty University. Once I received approval from the IRB, I started the sampling process. Because the participants were minors, I obtained permission from parents (Appendix B). Since these are elementary-school-aged students, I met with the administrator to give letters to their homeroom teachers to distribute to the students (Appendix B). At the bottom of the letter, there was a place for parents to consent or decline participation. I communicated with the principal to notify parents to expect a form from their student about the study. Letters sent home to the parents or guardians detailed the purpose of the study, specifically explaining the anonymity of the students and giving parents the option to consent to their child's participation. I required all parents to complete the form and to return it to their child's teacher, even if they declined study participation. As an incentive, students received $15.00 for their participation. I accepted the first 12 forms received that met my purposeful sampling criteria. Purposeful sampling was utilized because all the students were bounded with similar educational experiences and because it provided information about their experience matriculating in the school as well as about the instructional practices utilized by the teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I communicated to the students their acceptance into the study and called all the parents to verify their child's participation and to answer any other questions they might have.

Upon receiving and confirming the participants, I began the student observations. I announced to the teacher the time and the date of the observations of the students. I conducted an observation of each participant in the classroom setting for thirty minutes. I utilized the observation protocol worksheet (Appendix C). During the observation, I took notes on all activities and actions during class time, making special notes of things done to motivate students. I transcribed all details with appropriate time stamps to ensure best practices and substantiate my trustworthiness.

Next, I documented the teacher's strategies for motivating students. Evidence included student work samples, teacher notes, anchor charts, audio clips, or video samples. I ensured anonymity by deleting student and teacher names. Documents were analyzed and triangulated along with the interviews and observations.

Lastly, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants at the school site, following current COVID-19 social distancing protocols. The questions allowed students to expound on motivation and give relevant input. The questions ranged from having students explain their experiences and self-determination and how teacher-led activities impacted them. The questions focused on motivation of African American students. Upon the completion of the interview, students received fifteen dollars for their participation in the study. I used pseudonyms to ensure that participant identities would remain confidential.

The Researcher's Role

As an African American male, I have always been intrigued by the academic performance gap. I have served in public and private schools and witnessed the disparities created by this achievement gap. Frankly, it was appalling to see how African American students performed on their local assessments compared to their counterparts. As a tool that can change

the lives of people, education must not be taken lightly, especially in African American communities. I held no role, paid or volunteer, at the site or with the participants. I had no authority over the students or the staff members participating in this research. I conducted this research to explore student perceptions of teachers' instructional strategies and how it impacted the motivational needs of African American students. This research does not advocate for or against private schools.

For this study, I had a few biases. One bias was that the responsibility for change rests on the teachers and the administrators. Violence and dysfunctional structures permeate African American communities, which is why I chose to focus on motivational support. The deficit in that area often allows these issues to weigh heavily and can cause a level of apathy to rest on an individual. African American children often suffer from environmental deprivation, violence in and out of the community, disengaged teachers, and chaotic schools (Fitzgerald, Miles, & Ledbetter, 2019). Another bias was my sense that teachers often overlook the motivational needs of African Americans, sometimes intentionally and other times unintentionally. Even though I experienced apathy myself as a student, I was able to separate my own experiences and be objective with the data to eliminate suggestive personal experiences. I further assumed that this negligence has caused students to develop apathy toward their academics and building relationships with school staff. I bracketed my biases out by answering the interview questions and kept them readily accessible to remain objective as the researcher.

Data Collection

For this qualitative study, data was collected using observations, documents, and interviews. First, I observed the participants in the classroom setting, utilizing the observation protocol sheet (Appendix C) to document how the students responded to teacher strategies. As an

observer in the classroom, I had opportunities to see relatedness, autonomy, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Next, I obtained documents from the teachers. I chose to use observations and documents because they would allow me to access information beyond the interview. Lastly, I interviewed the participants. There were standards in place to guide the interview questions (Appendix B).

Observations

The first data collected in this qualitative research were classroom observations. I visited each participant's classroom for 30 minutes and took notes following the observation protocol (Appendix C). I recorded students' engagement and teacher-student interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, I completed reflective notes after I left, giving detailed descriptions of the events and people in the observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I scheduled classroom observation sessions to observe the teachers' interaction with students to see what strategies are used to motivate students. These were unannounced observations to receive a more accurate indicator of the reality of the classroom.

I observed the 12 students at the Center of Excellence. I was a nonparticipant observer. The observation lasted for at least 30 minutes to observe each participant utilizing the observation protocol sheet (Appendix C). During this time, I focused on signs of participants' stress, engagement, and activity. I also attended to teacher responses to a specific participant and the exchange. Motivation is essential to self-determination and autonomy, competency, and relatedness, contributing to this phenomenon (Chiu, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wang, Liu, Kee, & Chian, 2019). During the observation time, I did not disrupt instruction, nor did I ask questions or interact with the students. I stayed in a stationary position. It was imperative to transcribe conversations and language used to explain instruction, student questions, teacher responses,

teacher nonverbal interactions, engagement and instructional strategies. I looked for students' signs of increased autonomy, relevance, and confidence and observed and noted teacher and student interaction. During the observations, I addressed both the central question and all the sub-questions.

Documents

Next, I collected documents as data points for this qualitative study. Creswell and Poth (2018) included documents and artifacts as a form of data. I collected the first set of documents after the observation. These documents consisted of student samples, teacher lesson plans, and guided notes if applicable for this lesson. Collected documents addressed sub-question 1 in relation to autonomy for self-determination theory. From teacher lesson plans and student samples, I was able to see if students were given options in their assignments (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, documents addressed sub-question 2 concerning relatedness because they revealed how students connected with the activities, which helped foster engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). I omitted specific names to ensure anonymity. I collected the second set of documents three days after the observation. These documents included any anchor charts, other lesson plans, other student samples, and teacher notes that conveyed instructional strategies utilized to address the motivational needs of African American students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Similar to the observations, the documents addressed the central question and all three sub-questions.

Interviews

Finally, I conducted interviews in a private conference room at the Center of Excellence. Twelve students were interviewed face-to-face and asked a series of age-appropriate research questions (Appendix D). The interview was semi-structured to allow the interviewer and

interviewee to diverge into other areas to pursue responses or go into detail (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). A device recorded the verbal exchanges to capture the entire interchange.

Participants answered a series of questions. The questions fostered conversation and limited one-word answers. These open-ended questions were centered around the phenomenon and allowed conversation and helped collect needed data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There was a steady increase in the complexity of the questions. Interviews were the main form of data collection, lasting 20 to 25 minutes per participant. I wrote notes and audio recorded the interviews. The purpose of the recording was to ensure that captured information was accurate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I transcribed the audio recording using Microsoft Word. I met later with each participant to ensure that I had correctly captured the information.

Interview questions

1. Describe yourself: Where were you born? Have you been enrolled in another school before this one?
2. Tell me about the things that you like about school.

   Questions 1 and 2 are basic questions. They offered a time in which the participants could engage in basic conversations about their lives. Though not intrusive into direct data, these questions provided pertinent information about the participant (Gill et al., 2008).
3. Describe times in class or at school that made it hard to complete a task and made you want to give up.
4. What have your teachers done to help you not give up?
5. What are some of the favorite learning games you have done in school?

Questions 3, 4, and 5 were related to self-determination and motivation. I purposefully positioned these questions to discuss the school environment because it plays a role in motivating students. Students should perform better and be motivated best when there is a sense of belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2000). I asked question 4 to detail the connectivity of the students and the teachers. Guay, Stupnisky, Boivin, Japel, and Dionne (2019) determined that connectivity and belonging contributed positively to intrinsic motivation in their study. Question 5 aimed to capture the diversity of instructional practices that the teachers implemented in the classrooms. Answers to questions 3, 4, and 5 addressed all three sub-questions.

6. Tell me a time when you told your teacher about how you want to learn.

   Questions 6 deals with autonomy, addressing the first sub-question. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), autonomy is a necessity for fostering self-determination. Students should have a say in their learning styles. Alley (2019) also suggests that students ought to have input, providing feedback to their teachers and owning their learning experiences (Alley, 2019). In return, teachers become supporters instead of controllers, which encourages students to try harder.

7. Tell me a time when your teacher helped you complete an assignment.

   Question 7 aimed to address sub-questions 2 and 3. This question details whether students are guided and supported so that they can produce the desired outcome. Connectivity and closeness are essential in self-determination, and this question helps analyze this factor by looking at the teacher's relationship with the student (Guay et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wang et al., 2019.) Competence is another factor this question was designed to explore. Wang et al. (2019) argued that when a student is competent and

reaches mastery, it builds self-determination (Wang et al., 2019). In other research, Noels, Clement, and Pelletier (1999) determined that competency and motivation directly correlate with student perception of teacher behavior. If students do not feel supported by their teachers, it will interfere with their competency and relatedness.

8. What lessons have your teachers taught that celebrate your African American culture? How did that make you feel?
9. What were your favorite group activities?

Questions 8 and 9 dealt specifically with relatedness and competence, answering the second and third sub-questions. Relatedness contributes to motivation, according to Ryan and Deci (2000). Therefore, in questions 7, 8, and 9, students were asked how teachers have fostered such an environment (Chiu, 2021). Wang et al. (2019) state that teachers should create lessons relevant to the students' lives. Drawing on their cultural experience fosters connectivity and creates a framework for motivation.

Data Analysis

After data collection, I utilized the process outlined by Yin (2018) and Creswell and Poth's (2018) for data analysis. This process included "managing and organizing the data, reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and accessing interpretations, [and] representing and visualizing the data" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 186). I collected data, transcribed interviews, conducted member checking, and began data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

I analyzed the semi-structured interviews first by transcribing them utilizing Microsoft Word. I reviewed the transcription to ensure accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I conducted member checking by giving the participants a printed copy of their interview

and allowing them time to review accuracy. The transcription process allowed me the opportunity to familiarize myself with the content, keeping the theoretical lenses in mind, which helped me readily identify them as they were echoed throughout the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I read and reread the data set in order to ensure immersion in the data, while searching for meanings and patterns in the data, taking notes and writing down ideas for coding, which I revisited in subsequent data analysis phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I utilized open coding for the participants' data. Open coding is a process in which the researcher analyzes the data to identify major themes that emerge from the information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I read all the participant responses to the interview questions that had been entered in Microsoft Word. As I read, I coded and then color coded the patterns and trends in the text. I looked over the data for connections and relationships (Yin, 2018). I utilized axial coding, arranging themes that emerged as most relevant to the study. Axial coding is beneficial to this process because it enabled me to further refine, realign, and categorize the themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). By utilizing axial coding, I was able to identify the relationships among the categories.

Next, I analyzed the observations. The observation protocol sheets were hand coded along with notes. I determined the frequency of instructional strategies that motivate students. The frequencies were entered into a data table.

I analyzed the documents. As I reviewed the documents, I hand coded, wrote descriptions, and grouped each document by themes as they emerged. Finally, I synthesized all the data and triangulated them.

Bracketing

Bracketing is a process used by researchers to lessen potential adverse effects of unacknowledged preconceptions that can sway the study, lessening the rigor and creditability of the research (Tufford & Newman, 2012). I used bracketing to remain objective and kept my biases from leading the research. Before analyzing any data, I made note of my personal views regarding the African American achievement gap. As I analyzed data, I put aside my notes, which included my own personal biases and experiences as an African American student and administrator to low-performing African American students that could have impacted my views and created levels of empathy during this process. Doing so allowed me to objectively view the participants' experience. Additionally, it also helped me gain a better understanding of myself and why I am interested in the researching the impact of instructional strategies that motivate African American students.

Trustworthiness

Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) stated that trustworthiness is the process that research undergoes to ensure that policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and the public can respect the research and consider it legitimate. There were several objectives throughout this research study to build trust, including the use of peer-reviewed articles, triangulation, prolonged engagement, and direct quotes. According to Connelly (2016), there should be confidence in the data and interpretation to ensure the quality of the research. This section addresses the creditability, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the research.

Credibility

I completed this research using methods like those used in other single-case studies (Connelly, 2016), using three different types of data sets and collection methods. Particularly

with the semi-structured interviews, I allowed member checks, increasing the accuracy and credibility of that data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the study, there was prolonged and deliberate engagement at the site. I completed the interviews and the observations in a timely manner, but the participants were not rushed, and each observation was intentional. Additionally, adequate time was allocated in the classroom for observing the participants' behaviors. Spending time in the classroom allowed engagement and provided the opportunity to discern the culture of the school.

Dependability and Confirmability

I triangulated the data. Korstjens and Moser (2018) mention triangulation as a means of solidifying creditability by involving multiple data sources, multiple investigators, and multiple methods of data collection. The research design was well-defined, and the steps were clear enough to ensure that replication of the research will be doable. I took detailed notes during the interviews and the observations. There was neutrality in the observation to confirm that the findings were not influenced by opinion or bias (Connelly, 2016). I allowed for member checking, by which participants were allowed to review the findings and interpret the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Korstjens and Moser (2018) coined the term *reflexivity* to refer to a means of self-reflection on oneself as the researcher and on one's relationship to the respondents. I journaled my responses to my interview questions and kept them handy during data analysis to get unbiased data.

Transferability

According to Nowell et al. (2017), transferability addresses the generalizability of inquiry. I recorded detailed information regarding the setting, process, and participants. To

provide transferability, I used thick and rich descriptions. To further increase transferability, I chose a topic that is on the leading edge of change in education (Slevin & Sines, 2000).

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study, I received IRB approval from Liberty University and permission from the principal to use the site as a place of study. I used pseudonyms for the school site itself, all the participants, and all the teachers that were mentioned in the study to ensure confidentiality. In addition, parents and those participating in the research study received a confidentiality statement assuring anonymity during the research.

I stored all data in a password-protected and secure device. All data collected during the research will be kept for three years and then deleted. When completing the study, I ensured that composite stories are represented in the text to ensure confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, I reported multiple perspectives and findings in the study to ensure that there is no siding with students or teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methods for the single-case study on teachers' usage of instructional strategies to motivate African American students. The research questions and the theory framed the direction of the study. The data collection and analysis were detailed, giving three points of data (Yin, 2018). Additionally, there was a discussion regarding the research study's ethical measures, creditability, trustworthiness, and dependability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These suggestions and recommendations were adhered to throughout the study.

There have been countless discussions concerning the achievement gap. However, the academic gap still exists between African Americans and Whites (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Bowman et al., 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017, 2019; Paschall et al., 2018).

While there has been an emphasis on discipline and poverty, not enough has been done. This study explored the instructional strategies that teachers implement to support the motivational needs of African Americans to combat these academic disparities. The hope is that this study will lend a wealth of usable information to educators in both the public and the private sectors.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this single-case study was to explore upper-elementary African American students' perceptions of effective motivational and instructional strategies in an eastern North Carolina private school. The problem was that teachers often neglected the motivational needs of African American students (Flint et al., 2019; Grace & Nelson, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Academic advisors and decision-makers in various school districts and educational institutions may share the information contained in this chapter with hopes of impacting the trajectory of African American students. Data were collected about 12 male African American students from classroom observations, interviews, and documents. This chapter presents the findings, describing the participants and uncovering the themes that emerged surrounding the research questions.

One central research question and three sub-questions guided this study:

Central Question: According to upper-elementary African American students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at Center of Excellence to improve the motivation of African American students within the classroom?

Sub-question 1: According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to foster autonomy among African American students?

Sub-question 2: According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to foster relatedness among African American students?

Sub-question 3: According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to help African American students become competent?

Participants

All the participants in the study were upper-elementary students and African American males. The participants ranged from ages 8 to 11 and had attended the Center of Excellence the previous year or longer. Pseudonyms were assigned to all 12 participants as shown in Table 1, which also indicates the grade and age of each participant.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Pseudonym	Grade	Age
Jeffrey	3	8
Kodi	3	8
Joseph	4	9
Nate	4	9
Oscar	4	9
Zach	4	9
Brady	5	10
Daniel	5	10
Dontrell	5	10
Raymond	5	10
Timothy	5	10
Travis	5	10

Jeffrey

Jeffrey is a third-grade student who seemed eager to participate in the study. When asked to describe himself, Jeffrey stated that he was “energetic” and loved to watch TV (Jeffrey, Interview, November 1, 2022, 0.26). He also mentioned that he loved to go to school, play basketball, and play on his Xbox and PlayStation 5 (Jeffrey, Interview, November 1, 2022, 0.34). When asked if he had been enrolled in another school before this one, he mentioned attending daycare but never had any school experience other than the Center of Excellence (Jeffrey, Interview, November 1, 2022, 1.16). I asked Jeffrey to mention the things that he liked about school, and he replied that he loved learning (especially things he never knew before), hanging out with his friends, hanging out with the teachers, getting to know the principal (Jeffrey, Interview, November 1, 2022).

Kodi

Kodi, a third-grade student, appeared shy and reserved in the classroom setting and the interview. Kodi mentioned that he was lazy and that he goes outside and plays on his phone (Kodi, Interview, November 1, 2022). Kodi was born in New York and went to another school before the Center of Excellence—the one across the street, with the “green roof” (Kodi, Interview, November 1, 2022, 0.54). When asked what he liked about school, he said he enjoyed learning new stuff, doing experiments, and discovering things he did not know (Kodi, Interview, November 1, 2022).

Joseph

A fourth-grade student who participated in the study, Joseph appeared interested yet warm and charming. Born in North Carolina, he has attended the Center of Excellence since he started school (Joseph, Interview, November 4, 2022). When asked to describe himself, Joseph

mentioned being “kind and loving,” adding that he liked to play and was not mean (Joseph, Interview, November 4, 2022). When asked what he liked about school, he said he “liked doing reading and math” (Joseph, Interview, November 4, 2022, 0.52). He also mentioned that he likes other subjects and that they have recess and can experience music and other stuff (Joseph, Interview, November 4, 2022).

Nate

Fourth grader Nate, who participated in the study, appeared confident and expressive. Nate was somewhat unsure of where he was born; however, he has attended the Center of Excellence since starting school (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022, 0.35). When asked to describe himself, Nate mentioned being a “Black male” and being “good at sports” (Nate, Interview, November 3, 0.12). He also added that he had a “great family” and played baseball (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022, 0.12). When asked about the things he liked about school, he said he loved learning about “historical months” (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022, 1:00). Lastly, he enjoys learning, going outside, playing, and seeing his friend (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022, 1:00).

Oscar

Oscar is another fourth-grade student who participated in the study. Apparently outgoing, enthusiastic, and extroverted, he seemed to enjoy the interview and the opportunity to converse about his school experience. When asked to describe himself, Oscar mentioned that he loves “playing games” and “making friends” and likes “going to sleep” (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022, 0.11), explaining that sleep helps him get energy so he can play games again (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022, 0.25). Oscar is from North Carolina and attended two schools before coming to the Center of Excellence (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022). Oscar

mentioned that his parents had switched him to this school because he was playful; they felt he was not learning much at his former school (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022). Oscar called the Center of Excellence "my school," adding that he loved the school and that it "teaches me things as a Christian" (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022, 1.38, 1.41). When asked about the things he liked about the school, he mentioned that he liked that the school was private and was an all-male school (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022). He further explained that he liked math, especially multiplication, and iReady: "My teacher prepared me for this, and I appreciate it" (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022, 2.15).

Zach

Zach, a fourth-grade student who participated in the study, appeared very quiet, introverted, and polite but seemed very interested in participating in the interview. As time progressed, he opened up, and the conversation seemed very organic. Zach described himself as "sweet, kind, faithful, funny, and nice" (Zach, Interview, November 2, 2022, 0.08). Zach was born in another state, but has attended only the Center of Excellence for his schooling (Zach, Interview, November 2, 2022). When asked about the things he liked during school, he said he liked learning and every aspect of school, especially recess (Zach, Interview, November 2, 2022).

Brady

Brady is a fifth-grade student who participated in the study. Brady appeared outgoing, expressive, interested, and engaged with his learning. Brady seemed to be excited about this study. Brady described himself as tall (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022). When asked if he had gone to any other school, Brady clarified that he had attended only the Center of Excellence for all his years of school (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022). When asked to tell the things

he liked about school Brady mentioned that he loved that teachers “give options to do other stuff like we can read our other books” (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022, 1.06; 1.14). He further explained that there are times when they can do their favorite things such as drawing (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022).

Daniel

Daniel, another fifth grader who participated in the study, appeared reserved, aloof, distant, and serene. When asked to describe himself, Daniel mentioned that he was very kind and helpful and liked to play (Daniel, Interview, November 14, 2022). Daniel was born in another nation and attended two other institutions before he enrolled in the Center of Excellence (Daniel, Interview, November 14, 2022, 0.32). Daniel said the things he liked about school were his friends and the things that they do in “math, science, and ELA” (Daniel, Interview, November 14, 2022, 0.45).

Dontrell

Another fifth-grade participant in the study, Dontrell seemed excited to participate in the study and appeared sociable and communicative. When asked to describe himself, Dontrell mentioned that he liked “playing video games” (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022, 0.12). Dontrell was born in the city where the Center for Excellence is located and had not attended any other educational institution (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022). When asked what he liked about the school, Dontrell mentioned math, science, and “how they treat us” (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022, 1.24), explaining, “They treat us like we’re a big family” (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022, 1.29).

Raymond

Raymond is a fifth-grade student who participated in the study and appeared motivated, open, and approachable. When asked to describe himself, he mentioned that he was African American and liked school, sports, and reading (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022). Born in North Carolina, he attended another school for pre-K but had been at the Center of Excellence since (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022). When asked what he liked about the school, he mentioned "the classroom and the teachers" (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022, 1.06).

Timothy

Fifth grader Timothy is a study participant who seemed active, observant, and well-adapted. He was very engaged in the study and seemed to enjoy being a participant. When asked to describe himself, Timothy mentioned that he was "a black male with brown skin, long arms, and long legs" (Timothy, Interview, November 8, 2022, 0.06). Born in the same city, Timothy had attended only the Center of Excellence (Timothy, Interview, November 8, 2022). When asked what he liked about the school, he said he liked "the way they treat you, the way they help you learn" (Timothy, Interview, November 8, 2022, 0.44).

Travis

Travis is a fifth-grade student who participated in the study. Appearing to be sharp, expressive, and very communicative, he also seemed super excited about being in the study and was quick to share his Christian foundation (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022). Travis said he loved to "step and preach" when asked to describe himself and mentioned his place of worship (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 0.07). Travis said that he attended another school in a neighboring county before coming to the Center of Excellence (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022). When asked about his time at the school, Travis mentioned that he had left the Center

of Excellence, experienced education at another institution, and then reenrolled (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022). What Travis said he liked about school is the "Christian-based stuff," particularly the "devotions in the morning" (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 1.41, 1.46).

Results

That data were collected through interviews in which 12 African American male students were asked nine questions about their motivation and educators' instructional strategies. Second, these students were observed in the classroom, and notes were taken to document student and teacher interaction, student engagement, and response to instruction. Lastly, teachers turned in documents that revealed the scope and sequence of the lesson, student work samples, and teacher feedback. These three data points were analyzed for common themes. First, coding was completed, then axial coding was done, and then the themes and subthemes emerged. Table 2 lists the themes identified and the number of occurrences of each in the data.

Table 2

Themes

Theme and code	Number of open-code appearances
Differentiated Instruction	
Small Groups	14
Scaffolding	64
Partnerships	16
Autonomous Learning	9
Remediation & Enrichment via Technology	26
Progress Monitoring	20

Modeling	5
Teacher Affirmation	
Verbal	22
Proximal	10
Written	15
Cultural Awareness	
Identity	14
Inclusion in instruction	19
Relationships	
Student-teacher	23
Staff-staff	1
Student-family	2
Student-student	5

Theme 1: Differentiated Instruction

The first theme that emerged is Differentiated Instruction. This theme addresses academic output and teacher efforts to mitigate the lack of understanding or competence. The interviews, observation, and documents revealed that the teachers differentiated their instruction to instigate and support students' cognition. Teachers supported students academically through various means. Some of the means were readily accessible and described by the students. In contrast, others I observed were beyond the students' awareness, such as small groups, scaffold assignments, enrichment, remediation, modeling, purposeful partnerships, and autonomous

learning. When asked about their favorite learning games, the participants gave several common responses such as “iReady,” “extra math,” “Prodigy,” or “math games.”

During the interviews, students described activities that they enjoyed. Most of these activities were specific educational activities to identify students’ academic level and provide remediation for the students. All the participants noted these games and assessments. Jeffrey mentioned that he liked iReady—educational software that differentiates instruction. This program offers enrichment and remediation for students while also giving benchmarks that will support and adjust learning pathways. In reference to iReady, Jeffrey said “I like that they help me learn. They helped me learn. So, like if I struggle, like it will help me. So, like they would like to help . . . so I can . . . pass it and then get it right” (Jeffrey, Interview, November 1, 2022, 2:54; 3:10). Kodi described a time when he utilized ABC Mouse—educational software that allows students to learn interactively. Kodi mentioned that he was able to use ABC Mouse to discover how to find new patterns and blends in math; students also had the opportunity to play “button battle” (a computer game within the software) with each other (Kodi, Interview, October 18, 2022). Nate mentioned Prodigy and how this instrument fostered engagement in his learning:

> Prodigy is like a math game that gives you multiplication or division. And it helps you with your math. You can choose reading or math. And it helps you play against other people. But it still got learning. And iReady, is the same thing as Prodigy, but you play it every time; it gives you assessments. You can take your quiz. And it helps you do better, see how far you got. (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022, 3:28)

Travis described a time when the teacher utilized iReady and further scaffolded the assignment to ensure his success (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 5:40). Travis mentioned

that iReady helped him by offering support by reteaching some of the material, but it was still difficult (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022):

> This last year, it was this iReady problem I didn't know. I was confused, and so I need help with this. So I just asked Mr. Jackson if he could help me out like he helped me with the problem. He helped me out with it. He taught me it when it was paused because I didn't know what the instructions meant. And so they told me, and then I understood it (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 5:51)

Jeffrey mentioned a time when he asked the teacher to better organize the information so that he could do it based on his own learning style. Jeffrey explained, "Mr. Lindsey, like sometimes, sometimes he would like to put lines when I was doing like 100 math problems lines through it. And I asked him, could you start doing that more? He said okay" (Jeffrey, Interview, November 1, 2022, 3:52). Kodi also described a time when he vocalized to the teacher that he wanted to learn by doing math problems on the whiteboard and Smartboard (Kodi, Interview, November 1, 2022). Raymond interjected his wishes in learning by telling the teacher, "I like it when you do some more science about spiders and some more animals. Most of the time, I asked [Mr. Jackson], can we do some more labs?" (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022, 5:08; 5:34). When asked a follow-up question concerning options, Brady mentioned a time that the students had an option to "do a brochure or it was something that like a brochure . . . or we could do cards" (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022, 1:55).

Raymond mentioned times when the teacher would break things down for him to understand, especially when he got to a difficult part of the activity (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022). He further added that there was "the time when Mr. Jackson helped me complete an assignment was with multiplication. I didn't know multiplication then, and he broke

it down like step by step to help me understand" (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022, 5:55). Dontrell mentioned a time when Mr. Lindsey taught them how to "stack numbers to do addition or times, multiplication, dividing, and you stack the numbers up, but he did differently, and then he started doing it like that 'cause all of us wanted to learn. Well, I wanted to learn like that" (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022, 4:24).

During the observations, the teacher utilized stations in the classroom quite frequently. Although the teacher had the students in small groups, there were still times when the teacher would pull the student out to work one-on-one (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022). Mr. Lindsey also gave the students options to show competence in multiplication; his instructions were, "You have two options. It is a board game like Candy Land, or you can complete a worksheet" (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022, 1:52). Candy Land was a game in which the students had to answer multiplication problems correctly in order to move their pieces forward. During the observation, that teacher would often model for the students when they were frustrated, or he scaffolded the assignment (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022). In this observation, I saw that students had difficulty completing the worksheet of multiplication problems; the teacher drew and underlined key terms and said, "So draw three groups" (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022, 9:32).

In another observation, students were tasked to use their Chromebooks to go a website that discussed earthquakes (Zach, Observation, October 18, 2022). When students had difficulty following the instructions, Mr. Jackson modeled on the screen how to navigate to STEMscopes.com; also, when the student had difficulty reading aloud, he made him sound it out and read it correctly (Zach, Observation, October 18, 2022). During that time, the teacher would pull students out to work with them in small groups while the rest worked on their iReady

program (Nate, Observation, October 20, 2022). It was not uncommon for the teacher to instruct the students with active reading; Ms. Weaver had the students "circle the words that have *then* and *after*" (Nate, Observation, October 20, 2022, 9:42).

During observations, the teachers utilized a significant amount of time pulling the students closer to facilitate remediation or enrichment. In one observation, the students began to work on iReady math while eating snacks (Raymond, Observation, October 28, 2022). Also, teachers would pull students into a different area to work with them one-on-one for remediation. I observed the teacher calling Daniel aside and beginning to work with him on inferences (Daniel, Observation, October 27, 2022).

The documents I analyzed revealed that teachers consistently differentiated. There was an array of activities that teachers utilized that helped them with differentiation, such as small groups, iReady, whiteboard usage, graphic organizers, exit tickets for progress monitoring, modeling, and autonomy. Teachers also utilized graphic organizers to help the students arrange a sequence of events.

Theme 2: Teacher Affirmation

The second theme that emerged was Teacher Affirmation. All the participants conveyed the sentiments that they appreciated the teachers expressing positive feelings that combated difficult learning moments and helped them continue to move forward. When asked what teachers did to help them not give up, students described their teachers' affirmation. This is an example of extrinsic motivation. First, teachers motivated them to complete tasks by encouraging them to work harder or told them to restart assignments that were once deemed too difficult to proceed. Three types of Teacher Affirmation presented in this study impacted students' responses: verbal, proximal, and written.

When asked about a time when his teacher helped him complete an assignment, Dontrell described a moment that was difficult and mentioned that it was the verbal input from his teacher that helped him get through that complicated task:

> Well, we were doing this thing. I think it's called for– I don't know what it's called, but I was doing it in the classroom. And when we went to lunch, we, well, I was doing the assignment, and then we left to go to recess and then went to lunch. I came back. He said, "Dontrell, you can do this," and then I finished right when he said [it or], well, like a minute later. (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022, 05:47)

Travis also recalled a time when his teacher gave verbal affirmation that helped him complete a difficult worksheet, "[Mr. Jackson] just tell us to not try to, to don't give up" (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 02:52). Travis further mentioned that the teacher also would "talk to us, lead us, or just show and give us example of what to do" (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 03:21). Nate further supported this theme of affirmation as a tool of redirection and refocusing (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022). When asked how he wants to learn, he mentioned that he likes learning when there is encouragement and direction on what to do (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022, 04:40). Nate demonstrates further that direction and refocusing is a tool of affirmation by stating, "They can tell me if I don't write good. Or if I'm not learning, I need to focus better" (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022).

Teachers framed their day with verbal affirmation utilizing technology. When asked about a time that his teacher helped him not give up, he stated, "Every morning this year [he] show[ed] lessons about not giving up" (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022, 2:09), referring to the teacher's having them watch an inspirational video daily.

During the observations, proximal and verbal affirmations were highly prevalent. Due to the participants' young age, they did not describe details about affirmation; however, I observed and documented that the students worked slightly differently in the presence and the proximal radius of the teacher. Mr. Lindsey was working with students in stations, and one student looked puzzled. The teacher leaned over to Kodi and asked him, "What problem are you trying to solve?" (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022, 1:46). After the student pointed to the problem, the teacher asked him to do the multiplication check for multiples of nine with his fingers, and the student pulled out his hand and began to show him (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022). The student got it incorrect, and the teacher redirected and explained the finger trick again, explaining: "This is why we have to get the facts down" (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022, 1:46). At that point the student got the answer correct, and the teacher gave verbal affirmation by saying, "Good job" (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022, 1:46). When the teacher leaned into the student's proximity and asked a question, there was open dialogue; although the student seemed defeated, the teacher was there as reassurance and guided the child to success.

When students received proximal affirmation, student engagement increased. When Dontrell asked for help, the teacher walked over, and immediately, the student's engagement went from being relaxed and apathetic toward the assignment to sitting upright and being attentive to the teacher's directives (Dontrell, Observation, October 28, 2022, 10:00). When teachers are in close proximity to students, engagement and focus increase. During another observation, Ms. Weaver asked the students what a fictional text was, and she could gauge the level of attentiveness while she was with them. Based on my observation, due to her proximity, students were willing to try (Daniel, Observation, October 27, 2022, 10:55). She affirmed

Daniel's response and gave other examples to the neighboring students: "Fictional is fake, and nonfiction is not fake" (Daniel, Observation, October 27, 2022, 10:55).

Ms. Weaver also noted in her lesson plans that she would float and observe for understanding and correct answers. Additionally, the teachers commented on student work and gave affirmations such as "great work," "good," "great," "be sure to study each night," "proud of you," "keep it up," and "awesome".

Theme 3: Cultural Awareness

The third theme that emerged from the data is Cultural Awareness. During the interviews, I asked students what lessons celebrated their African American culture and how it made them feel. Words indicative of inclusion and joy, such as *happy*, *special*, *proud*, and *good* were mentioned. The participants described how discussing their heritage and the history of their people made them feel. Additionally, the participants strongly understood their identity as "Black" males and continuously interjected this awareness when describing themselves.

When asked how he liked learning about African American culture, Timothy said, "It makes me proud because I am an African American man, and I like to see other African American men succeed and women" (Timothy, Observation, October 25, 2022, 6:31). When asked about the lessons concerning African American culture, Brady mentioned a couple of commercials and a slideshow that they watched (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022, 5:12). Brady also mentioned learning about George Washington Carver, Dr. Howard, and other individuals that were known for their scientific contributions (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022). Finally, Brady mentioned that learning about African American culture made him feel "great because I got to do something I like with my African culture, but still doing something I like" (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022, 6:06).

Travis also mentioned individuals who made significant contributions to science, such as George Washington Carver and Madam C. J. Walker (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 7:03). When asked how it made him feel, he stated:

> Happy! Wow. Because I always like to look at the culture back then. We'll see how like, study about black history a lot. That's my favorite thing to do. It made me feel special in the talents, well, yeah, it just made me feel special. (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 7:34; 7:56)

The teachers developed lessons about the appreciation of African Americans and their culture. Nate mentioned, "We read about, well, she talked about I was probably doing a project on Black people or historical people. And yeah, that's all I covered . . . I feel, I feel good . . . Like, I learn different things that I didn't know about" (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022, 6:30; 6:51). One teacher assigned a project direction sheet surrounding an African American inventor. The students were asked to select an inventor. Jeffrey described the lesson:

> We [students] will have to like it was like he will have different people in this basket, and then he will shake it around, and we will get one out of there. And then we were like learn like read texts about them and get pictures from the printer and then make like, like, like a board with like, like Alexander Mouse. He created the shaft for the elevator because his daughter fell down the shaft, almost dying. (Jeffrey, Interview, November 1, 2022, 5:04)

In a classroom observation, Mr. Jackson was teaching students about heat and how heat changes the temperature of certain elements (Timothy, Observation, November 8, 2022). He assigned students to write a description of varying elements and how heat causes the temperature of the element to change. Mr. Jackson called the students' attention and gave an example of how

sand is different on the beach during the day versus at night, thus. showing the students how to use their own background experiences in writing about the topic (Timothy, Observation, November 8, 2022).

Mr. Lindsey presented an assignment that allowed the students to listen to the rounding rap, a part of African American culture. This was a connection point to the student's culture and experience that caused student engagement. During this activity students were attentive and participated with audio.

Theme 4: Relationships

Relationships was the fourth theme that emerged. Participants frequently described relationships with staff, teachers, and other students. When I asked students what they liked about school, they described what their teachers had done to help them not give up, and how the teachers helped them complete assignments. The participants repeatedly supported this point by saying that they liked "getting to know teachers," "helpfulness," and "encouragement." Participants described their relationships with teachers and with others as an instrument of motivation.

During the interviews, most participants elaborated on teachers being their reason for liking school. When asked what helped him not give up, Nate mentioned that teachers gave him encouraging words, helped him, and hugged him (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022, 2022). Daniel added that the teachers helped him not to give up by encouraging him (Daniel, Interview, November 14, 2022). Oscar credited his teacher for helping him get to where he is presently and said, "I like to learn math. Math is my thing. . . . Like my third-grade teacher got me ready for this, and I appreciate it" (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022, 2:15). Oscar described a how his teachers helped him:

> They also told me they loved me, and that helped me right back up, and then a second later, I'm acting it. And I'm laughing like, like, a second ago, I was just made. And now, a second later, I know how to do everything. (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022, 4:09)

Timothy said he liked the school because of "the way they treat you, the way they help you learn" (Timothy, Interview, November 8, 2022, 0.44). Timothy stated that the teachers "don't get mad at us when we do something wrong; they just help us learn more" (Timothy, Interview, November 8, 2022, 0.55). Raymond concurred: "The thing I like about school is the classrooms and the teachers" (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022, 1:06).

During the observations, I noticed several positive interactions with the students that fostered connection. One teacher did rock-paper-scissors with the students to see who would win the chance to be his partner (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022). Ms. Weaver allowed the students to do jumping jacks to encourage mobility and alertness and even participated with the students (Oscar, Observation, October 21, 2022). During the activity a student started misbehaving. To encourage attentiveness and engagement, the teacher mentioned that she is calling his mother today, leveraging his familial relationships to suppress his misbehaver (Oscar, Observation, October 21, 2022).

In another observation, Ms. Weaver gave a writing assignment in which the students had to write a formal letter to a local celebrity; the teacher utilized the local celebrity to engage students and build the relationship by conversing with the students concerning this topic (Nate, Observation, October 20, 2022). In another observation, the teacher joked with a student concerning a lost assignment. The student asked, "How did you lose a lightbulb?" The teacher responded, "The same way you lost your math worksheet" (Dontrell, Observation, October 28,

2022, 9:52). The student then opened his bag and found it. Both the teacher and the student laughed during the lesson (Dontrell, Observation, October 28, 2022).

Raymond also mentioned his family as a contributing factor in his academic success since his mother tried to inspire him to not quit: “My mom talked to me about the Edwards family, and she said the Edwards family never gives up” (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022, 1:55). Dontrell also mentioned that he liked “the way they [the teachers] treat us” and that the teachers “treat us like we’re a big family” (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022, 1:15; 1:26). Brady described how being able to talk and spend time with his friends was something he looked forward to in school (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022). He mentioned a group activity and that this group activity was something he looked forward to because it was a time he could talk to his “friends about a project” and that the bonus was that it was about their “culture” (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022, 7:25).

There were sample lessons plans that show how the teachers fostered collaboration and relationship building during learning activities. In one case, the teacher purposefully integrated her life experiences and upbringing and encouraged the students to give real-life examples. The lesson plans also demonstrated the intentionality of the teachers to help students build meaningful relationships as they worked with others in technology, shared meaningful background stories about themselves, and discussed their culture.

Responses to the Research Questions

The information in this section will connect the participant responses, observations, and documents to the research questions.

Responses to the Central Research Question

The central question for this study was, “According to upper-elementary African American students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to improve the motivation of African American students within the classroom?” The themes that addressed the central question were Differentiated Instruction, Teacher Affirmation, and Relationships. The instructional strategies that were used to motivate African American students were proximity, scaffolding, small groups, remediation and enrichment via technology, progress monitoring, and building student-teacher relationships The participants described their teachers as their motivation for coming to school. Several participants highlighted the teachers and the school climate as determining factors that helped them to like school and to keep pushing when they reached a difficult point in their assignments. Nate described a time when he needed help on an assignment, and his teacher helped him finish (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022, 2022). Nate also mentioned, “Whenever I say if I don’t know, I ask her, and she will say it again” (Nate, Interview, November 3, 2022, 3:02). Nate’s comments indicate the teachers’ willingness to help students when needed. It also shows that this is a point of interest and something that the student regarded as essential; he attributed teacher-guided moments as pivotal to completing the assignment. Oscar described a time when his teacher was his partner, and she helped him with a problem (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022). Oscar mentioned, “although she was my partner, she told me how to do this problem, and that touched me” (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022, 6:40).

During the observations, there were noticeable interactions in which the teacher caused students to pivot and excel in their activity. During a science project, Mr. Jackson gave Timothy a boost of confidence by affirming the student's process in taking temperatures from the three specimens: “You see the mistake you made last time; we are not going to make that mistake

again" (Timothy, Observation, October 25, 2022, 10:06). Ms. Weaver also used her special-needs' experience as a motivation to the students to work hard and not allow barriers to infringe on their ability to put forth their best effort (Travis, Observation, October 27, 2022). Timothy's and Travis's observations reveal the relational support role teachers have in students' lives. Because of their relationships and meaningful personal discussions, the teachers could excite the children and motivate them to complete assignments.

Several participants described the learning manipulatives and apps as motivational tools that kept them engaged and excited about learning. There were lesson plans in which the teacher decided to have students complete an interactive rounding rap. Oscar described the game, Bingo as an activity that he enjoyed in class (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022): "So basically, it's a math problem. You must guess the math problem right to put a piece right there. And that's all like that's the game that I love that school material" (Oscar, Interview, November 4, 2022, 11:00). Zach mentioned "iReady learning games" as his favorite learning activity (Zach, Interview, November 2, 2022). Dontrell said the things that he liked about school are the "math that they do, the science that they do, and the way they treat us" (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022, 1:15). Dontrell also explained a time when he was extremely frustrated with an assignment, "We had to make a three-D cube, and it was a paper cube and the paper cube kept falling and stuff. And I wanted to quit because it was hard" (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022, 1:46). Dontrell went on to say that it was Mr. Jackson who kept him motivated and helped him complete the assignment by showing him the appropriate way to tape the structure (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022). There was an assignment in which the teacher had students do a rounding activity with partners. In this activity, the teacher allowed students to use whiteboards or counting blocks to solve problems.

Responses to Sub-question 1

The first research sub-question was, "According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to foster autonomy among African American students?" The theme that addressed this sub-question is differentiation. The instructional strategies that were used included small groups, scaffolding, remediation and enrichment via technology, and modeling. Several participants described scenarios in which autonomous opportunities were given, increasing their engagement. Participants were asked whether they had suggested a way they liked to learn to a teacher. Several participants described the ways that they liked to learn. Participants used words such as *options*, *learning styles*, and *choices*. Brady mentioned receiving "options to do other stuff," including reading a book or drawing (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022, 1:01). He also mentioned being able to choose between creating cards or creating a brochure, explaining that this involved having the autonomy to do activities based on his learning style after taking an assessments to determine which style he preferred (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022). Brady's interview described opportunities when students have options and time in class to do the things that engage them the most. Additionally, the fact that the teachers invest in assessments surrounding learning styles reveals strong intentionality in engaging students in ways that will be profitable for their academic progress.

Raymond described telling Mr. Jackson, "I want to learn this way" (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022, 4:16). When asked to specify, Raymond mentioned that he asked the teacher if he could "learn more labs" as well as "learn more about spiders and more animals" (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022, 5:08; 5:34). Raymond described an autonomous group activity in which he and his partner could choose between various lessons and games as

long as it required reading (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022). Raymond's comments reveal a correlation between instruction and autonomy and that even elementary-age students can vocalize their preferred method. Mr. Lindsey allowed students to choose their method of error analysis for their math assignment by selecting whether to use their fingers, manipulatives, paper, or a calculator to check their answers (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022, 1:52). Teachers also gave the students the chance to choose between a board game such as Candy Land or a worksheet (Kodi, Observation, October 18, 2022, 1:52). Through observation, we can see the teacher's intentionality behind allowing students to choose their assignment.

Responses to Sub-question 2

The second sub-question was, "According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to foster relatedness among African American students?" The themes that addressed this sub-question are Relationships and Cultural Awareness. The instructional strategies that teachers utilized to foster relatedness included activities and projects focused on African American history, cultural components, identity, and students' personal experiences. Participants described their African American culture as being embedded throughout the curriculum. All the participants had positive comments concerning various relationships and seeing their culture in their curriculum. During data collection, recurring words and phrases were *the way they treat you*, *proud*, *African American*, *Black history*, and *special*.

When asked what lessons their teachers had taught that celebrated African American culture, the students responded with various examples that focused on African Americans and their contributions. Travis mentioned learning about George Washington Carter and Madam C. J. Walker (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 2022). Travis mentioned that he loved to analyze

Black history and that that was his "favorite thing to do" (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 7:34). Travis characterizes African American history as something that had him intrigued and that doing so contributed to his feeling "special in the talents" (Travis Interview, November 9, 2022, 7:56). Brady mentioned learning about George Washington Carver, Dr. Howard, and the first African American woman in space (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022). Brady stated, "I felt great because I got to do something I like with my African culture, . . . it makes me feel like wow, I want to be something like that one day" (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022, 6:06; 6:30). Travis's and Brady's responses indicate the personal connectivity and relevance to instruction due to the inclusion of their African American culture. Both students felt respected and special, contributing to their motivation to learn.

Timothy quickly commented, "the way they treat you and they help you learn," to describe things that he liked about school (Timothy, Interview, November 8, 2022, 0:44). Timothy further mentioned that the teachers "don't get mad at us when we do something wrong or something like that. They just help us learn more" (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 0.55). This discourse with Timothy reveals an appreciation for the teachers' relationships with the students and their patience while students are learning new material. Dontrell mentioned that the teachers treat the students like "one big family" (Dontrell, Interview, November 14, 2022, 1:26). This comment speaks volumes about the students' feeling included in the school environment and intricately woven into the culture of the school. Brady expounded on other relationships that fostered comradery; he mentioned group assignments surrounding African American culture and how he could partner with his friends while still completing the project (Brady, Interview, November 8, 2022).

Responses to the Sub-question 3

The third sub-question was, “According to the students, what instructional strategies do their teachers use at the Center of Excellence to help African American students become competent?” The themes that addressed this sub-question are Differentiation and Teacher Affirmation. The instructional strategies that teachers utilized to increase student competence included small groups, remediation and enrichment via technology, and the building of student-teacher relationships. The participants articulated several key phrases that indicated that the teachers created opportunities for students to see minute success so that they could see that they were competent enough to complete an activity or objective. Some of those keywords and phrases are *my teacher helped me*, *iReady*, *learning games*, *step by step*, *they pushed me*, and *you can do this*.

When asked what helped him not to quit, Timothy mentioned that his teachers were encouraging and pushed him not to give up (Timothy, Interview, November 8, 2022). He said that during his moments of frustration, his teachers would say, “You got this” (Timothy, Interview, November 8, 2022, 2:28). Timothy also described a time playing Prodigy, a math game in which students battle each other by solving problems, and how this encouragement helped them compete and win (Timothy, Interview, November 8, 2022). This reveals that the teacher’s comments to the students motivate them to continue, and the chosen assignments are done deliberately to increase competence and collaboration.

Raymond said that every morning during the year, the teachers would “show lessons about not giving up” (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022). He also mentioned a time when Mr. Jackson helped him complete an assignment by breaking it down “step by step” to help him understand (Raymond, Interview, November 15, 2022, 5:55). When Daniel was asked about an occasion when his teacher helped him complete an assignment, he described a time when he was

stuck completing fractions, and the teacher showed him how to split it evenly (Daniel, Interview, November 14, 2022). Travis explained his triumph over difficult assignments by saying the teachers would “help me out by instructing me and teach[ing] it to me step-by-step” (Travis, Interview, November 9, 2022, 3:39). Raymond and Travis expounded on times in which they reached competency with teacher direction and guidance.

During observations, Zach received help pronouncing a word; Mr. Lindsey had him sound it out while guiding him through correct enunciation (Zach, Observation, October 18, 2022). Mr. Jackson also helped a student become competent in answering a question by creating a hangman game so that the student would answer the question correctly (Joseph, Observation, October 17, 2022). Additionally, Ms. Weaver helped students plot points on a coordinated plan. She saw students struggling, then gave them a few examples, and then released them to do some independently until they were successful (Timothy, Observation, October 25, 2022). Zach’s, Joseph’s, and Timothy’s interactions present circumstances in which a teacher helped students reach competence even if modeling was necessary for students to become confident in doing the work independently.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings from the three data points: observations, interviews, and documents. The 12 African American male participants were introduced with detailed descriptions. The common themes that emerged from the data analysis were Teacher Affirmation, Cultural Awareness, Differentiated Instruction, and Relationships. Additionally, subthemes were presented. Most participants viewed their teachers as a source of motivation through verbal, written, or proximal interactions. They also expressed that the teachers helped them when assignments were difficult. The participants also described their culture as a

motivation for their success and engagement in school. Most participants mentioned being proud of their culture and viewing those moments during instruction as motivation that they could achieve. Participants expounded on the relationships and how they helped them feel included in the school as in a family. Additionally, Differentiated Instruction was a major observation and recurring feedback that participants echoed during the interview. Those instructional practices were strategies that motivated students and helped them become competent in reaching an objective.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this single-case study was to explore upper-elementary African American students' perceptions of effective motivational and instructional strategies in an eastern North Carolina private school. This chapter summarizes the research findings and answers to the central research question and the three sub-questions. The chapter also considers the study's theoretical, empirical, and practical implications in the context of relevant literature and theory. The delimitations and limitations of the study are presented. Finally, recommendations are offered for future research on instructional strategies and the motivation of African American students.

Summary of Findings

The participants in this study were 12 upper-elementary African American males who attended a private Christian school in eastern North Carolina. The participants in this study had various backgrounds and diverse educational experiences; some had previously attended public school, but some had only the Center of Excellence as their place of education. During data analysis, four themes emerged: Differentiation, Relationships, Teacher Affirmation, and Cultural Awareness.

The central research question focused on the instructional strategies teachers have used at the Center of Excellence to improve the motivation of African American students in the classroom. The themes that addressed this question were Differentiated Instruction, Relationships, and Teacher Affirmation. Participant responses indicated that both their teachers and the school's climate had positively impacted their willingness to try and were a determining

motivating factor for them to come to school. Participants underscored that differentiated activities and technological integration kept them engaged and excited about learning.

The first research sub-question sought to identify from the students' perspective what instructional strategies their teachers at the Center of Excellence had used to foster autonomy among African American students. The theme that addressed this sub-question was Differentiation. Participants described autonomous activities that increased engagement. Some participants described moments where teachers tailored the lesson to student learning styles. Additionally, when participants were allowed to choose, they took ownership of the assignment and became productive.

The second research sub-question was designed to identify the instructional strategies the student thought their teachers at Center the of Excellence had employed to foster relatedness among African American students. The themes that addressed this sub-question were Relationships and Cultural Awareness. Participants unanimously had positive comments concerning relationships and responded positively when the lessons explored African culture and history. Many participants mentioned being inspired by African Americans' contributions to society. Students unanimously declared teachers as crucial to their motivation. Several students felt included as family members of various staff members.

The purpose of the third research sub-question was to learn from the students what instructional strategies Center of Excellence teachers had used to help African American students become competent. The themes that addressed this sub-question were Differentiation and Teacher Affirmation. Participants unanimously described their teachers as catalysts for developing competence through lessons and activities. Participants also described teachers' implementation of differentiated instruction by utilizing educational software and apps to ensure

successful achievement. Most participants also described the teacher's proximal presence as a source of confidence and encouragement. Lastly, participants mentioned teachers' scaffolding assignments as a bridge to their competence in a specific objective.

Discussion

The findings of this study contributed to the literature in mentioned in chapter 2 related to the African American achievement gap and the STD theoretical framework. The following section details how this study extends and contributes to the previous research.

Empirical Discussion

The related literature in chapter 2 presented topics concerned with the academic achievement of African American students, such as culturally responsive teaching, mindset intervention, poverty, behavior, discipline, discrimination, stereotypes, policies, and differentiation (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Bowman et al., 2018; Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020; Owens, 2018; Paschall et al., 2018; Plucker & Peters, 2016). The findings from this present study concur with findings of previous studies regarding the African American achievement gap and motivation. Lessons tailored to students' cultures that encourage and develop relationships will result in engagement, increased connections, and decreased classroom misbehavior (Acosta, 2018; Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020; Carrol, 2017; Gregory & Roberts, 2017; Johnson et al., 2018). In this study, participants who had cultural ties to the lessons were inspired and motivated. Consequently, they were able to recall the lesson in detail because of their level of engagement in the activity.

Previous studies pinpointed African American students' success as a product of strong community and supportive school districts (Brevik et al., 2018; Green et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gregory & Roberts, 2017) In another study, the researchers found that educators

are successful with African American students when the curriculum is tailored toward their cultural experience, which is often understood and highlighted during intentional relationship building (Brevik et al., 2018). The findings of this study concur with the findings of Brevik et al. (2018) and Green et al. (2017). Participants in this study unanimously felt supported by their teachers and discussed times when the learning environment felt like a family. Several participants discussed the relationships that were developed and mentioned that this was a reason they did not give up on an assignment. The relationships were also a motivating factor to continue in school.

Plucker and Peters (2016) mentioned that if students are to achieve, they need the following from their educators: strong communication, belief and acceptance, and limited barriers to access. The participants in this present study confirmed Plucker and Peters's (2016) conclusions, expressing that they had advanced in their education due to teacher affirmation and continued communication from their teachers. Barriers of access were decreased as each student had opportunities to use various forms of technology. Through their lessons, teachers were able to change how students felt about themselves. The purposeful integration of African American history and culture inspired students and fostered intrinsic motivation.

Some previous studies that were reviewed explored differentiated instruction (Bondie et al., 2019; Brevik et al., 2018; Doubet & Hockett, 2017; Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018). Teachers' instructional decisions and strategic lesson planning can combat barriers prohibiting development (Bondie et al., 2019). Instructional differentiation provides educators with a place to begin bridging the achievement gaps (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). Strategies that make students feel safe, connected, and valued promote a growth mindset in all students (Fraser, 2018). The findings of this study concur with the findings of previous studies on instructional

practices (Bondie et al., 2019; Fraser, 2018; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). Teachers observed in this study intentionally planned lessons to include opportunities for scaffolding, small groups, and one-on-one time to effectively deliver the instruction to individual students. Differentiation increased motivation, feelings of competence, and relationship building. Consequently, this study extends the research regarding the African American achievement gap, motivation, and teacher instructional strategies.

Many studies on discipline, poverty, and discrimination were included in the literature survey (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Bowman et al., 2018; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Naser & Dever, 2019; Ramseth, 2018), but only a few previous studies have focused on instructional strategies and culturally responsive teaching (Acosta, 2018; Carrol, 2017; Green et al., 2017). This reveals that there is a need to focus on instructional strategies and teachers as the dynamic in the classroom that impacts motivation. Due to the lack of studies outside of those main topics, there is a deficiency in the research concerning motivation. During the data collection for this study, none of the participants brought up discipline, poverty, or discrimination but rather described their preferred instructional strategies that motivated them to succeed. Other researchers should continue the exploration of instructional strategies.

Theoretical Discussion

The theoretical framework that guided this study was SDT—Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, which addresses motivation and gives three definitive components of motivation: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). STD applied to this study as it addresses the participants' motivation to complete activities and their willingness to attend school. Additionally, it employs teachers' instructional practices that support participants. The study identified three essential elements that impact motivation: the participants'

involvement and socioemotional connections in school, the participants' level of competence, and the participants' choices in learning.

Teachers who interacted with participants implemented several instructional strategies that fostered autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Regarding autonomy, participants noted that when teachers gave them options, it enhanced their engagement, increasing the likelihood that they would complete assignments. Some of these options were related to students' various learning styles, increased engagement, and ownership. Regarding competence, participants noted that teachers often scaffolded their assignments by giving them step-by-step instructions and modeling expectations, helping them to complete the assigned task. Participants also described having a sense of belonging in response to cultural integration in the teaching. Additionally, participants attributed a sense of belonging and feeling like family to the relationships built among participants and school staff. This study confirmed to the viability of SDT as a framework for exploring the motivation of African American students and their autonomy, relatedness, and competence in school.

Implications

This section discusses the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the African American achievement gap, teachers' instructional strategies, and the motivation of upper-elementary African American students. Researchers have utilized SDT among students; however, minimal studies have given upper-elementary African American students a voice (Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Gray et al., 2018; Streb et al., 2015). These implications will help researchers to analyze the motivation of African American students more effectively and efficiently.

Theoretical Implication

This study utilized SDT as its theoretical framework to address the motivation for success and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to the theory, there is a strong need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence to stimulate and impact motivation, causing social development and personal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In this study, the teachers' interaction and instructional practices affected the participants' success and motivation.

The findings of the study support SDT and show that scaffolded content, learning games, and adjustment of teaching to students' learning styles form a strong and viable pathway for increasing African American motivation, directly impacting the achievement gap. Consequently, there should be a significant focus on instructional practices. Many participants described moments of high engagement due to their teachers' instructional practices. Those instructional practices were filled with SDT components and fostered increased motivation, a willingness to complete assignments, ownership in their learning pathways, and stronger relationships. SDT is a viable means of motivating students. Schools districts should offer professional development regarding the impact of motivation and how to integrate its components into lesson planning to facilitate it.

Empirical Implication

Although this current study implies that motivation is an important factor and should be researched, only minimal studies have been conducted on motivation. Therefore, this study can prompt further investigation of this topic. This study fills the gap in the existing literature by giving upper-elementary African American male students a voice concerning their motivation. It also reveals the unique perspective of motivation from an all-male African American school. Multiple studies on poverty, discipline, and discrimination have determined that those topics

have negative impacts on African American students' academic success (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Bowman et al., 2018; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Naser & Dever, 2019; Ramseth, 2018). Since it found positive outcomes, this study should encourage more studies surrounding motivation and teacher instructional strategies.

This study has empirical implications regarding the African American achievement gap, instructional practices, and motivation, providing empirical evidence to strengthen African American academic achievement by revealing motivation and teachers' instructional practices as a conduit for success. The participants described their teachers as the primary factor that increased their motivation and helped them not to give up. Thus, this study reveals that teachers have the most significant impact on student motivation, and their instructional practices could alleviate incompetence and the feeling of exclusion. Additionally, the study reveals that when teachers tailor assignments to students' culture, it will increase self-efficacy. Furthermore, participants mentioned feeling a sense of inspiration from studying their culture.

Practical Implication

The practical implication of this study shows that there should be increased professional development surrounding instructional practices. Collegiate educational programs should also focus on adding differentiation and instructional practices as necessary skill sets for those exiting their programs. The findings in this study also suggest the need for an increase in culturally responsive teaching. Although the topic was presented only periodically, participants indicated a positive response to learning about their own culture; it was impactful because it reinforced the participants' identity and gave them inspiration.

The findings also present district-level administrators and decision-makers with the necessity of individualized instruction and the need for continued usage of small groups as

students progress into higher grades. Participants frequently mentioned software programs that facilitated progress by providing monitoring and differentiated instruction. Policymakers and key stakeholders should explore software programs that increase motivation and competence. Those software options were technology-based and included progress assessments that restructured learning pathways based on competency. This will require a major adjustment in the district and the school's financial obligations. School districts may want to employ individuals to seek out grant opportunities for students to receive iPads or laptops in order to use the software. In addition, the staff will have to attend training to properly utilize the technology.

Delimitations and Limitations

One delimitation of this study was the purposeful recruitment of upper-elementary African American students. The reason for choosing students instead of educators as the participants was to create an opportunity for students to speak about how teachers instruct them and whether those practices motivate them. Interviewing teachers would have focused on perceived motivation, but talking directly with the students solidified the identification of motivational factors and left no speculation or ambiguity in the research. The selection of upper-elementary students was one aspect of this delimitation. I selected upper-elementary classes because those students could better articulate what motivated them and would likely responde better in a one-on-one interview with someone they had seen only infrequently.

Another delimitation was the use of a single-case study approach. Choosing this method allowed me to study human problems in a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This case study involved a narrative approach and a fully detailed account of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It also allowed me to work at one site and hear the participants' stories versus analyzing and looking only at numbers.

A limitation of this study is I had no control over the sample size. Since the school does not have a large student body, there was a limited pool of applicants. I could select only from elementary grades because their middle-grade level did not have enough students. Another limitation of this study is gender. The fact that it is an all-male school limited my research. As a rural private school, it only provided a perspective from participants in small and intimate educational settings.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study analyzed the African American achievement gap and how instructional practices affect student motivation. There is little research about instructional practices, and many researchers have focused on poverty, discipline, discrimination, and culturally responsive teaching (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Bowman et al., 2018; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Naser & Dever, 2019; Ramseth, 2018).

I want to offer future research recommendations based on this study's findings. The first recommendation is to conduct a similar study as this one among middle- and high-school African American students. Completing this research with upper-elementary students posed issues (e.g., these younger students struggled to articulate and explain how they were motivated). Also, many of them did not go into much detail. Middle- and high-school-aged young people could give greater evidence and examples. Additionally, elementary parents are typically more involved, creating added instructional pressure, intentionality, and accountability among elementary teachers. Conducting the research study with African American teenagers would reveal whether there is continued differentiation and small groups at the higher grade levels or if those instructional practices plateau as students progress through school.

The second recommendation is to conduct the study at an urban public school. This study was completed with a small population and in a private school. Collecting data from public schools will possibly yield varying responses as class sizes will impact instructional strategies and teachers' willingness to differentiate instruction for each child. Geographically, completing a study across various regions would also add to the body of empirical research on motivation of African Americans. This study utilized a qualitative method, and I recommend that future research be conducted using a quantitative or mixed method. A quantitative study would likely involve a larger study sample and could cover various grade levels and regions. Additionally, a quantitative study can examine test scores and assessment outcomes.

The third recommendation is to choose a population that includes females. This study was limited to African American males. Completing a study that includes females and males together could yield a response that would help educators reach or improve students of both genders. Also, I recommend that this study be conducted with other races. Since motivation is a key to success, other races can benefit from teachers' instructional practices that produce motivation. This can also compare teachers' instructional practices among various ethnic groups. Lastly, I recommend a longitudinal study to follow students over several years. This can see the impact of motivation over time.

Summary

The purpose of this single case-study was to explore the upper-elementary African American students' perceptions of effective motivational and instructional strategies in an eastern North Carolina private school. The themes that emerged from the data were Differentiated Instruction, Relationships, Teacher Affirmation, and Cultural Awareness. Participants described their teachers as a source of motivation during difficult times. Effective

teacher instructional strategies at those critical junctures helped students attain competence. Additionally, the relationships between participants and staff created a sense of family and belonging, contributing to students' desire to continue in school. Participants also felt inspired by cultural inclusion in the lessons. The themes that emerged from the data correlated with SDT. Teachers' interaction and their instructional practices fostered intrinsic motivation.

The conclusions of this study included the finding that where effective instructional practices are implemented, the byproduct will be increased motivation and improvement in academic performance. This study also concluded that school districts and decision-makers should focus on professional development that helps educators build their instructional skillset, mainly differentiation. Overall, when tailored instruction appeals to the students' own culture, it will boost motivation and, in turn, shrink the academic achievement gap. Future research should be conducted in various educational settings and with varying grade levels to aid in this research concerning African American achievement, motivation, and instructional practices.

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Appendix A

[redacted]

September 8, 2022

Charlie Howell, III, Principal

[redacted]

Dear Charlie Howell, III

After careful review of your research proposal Exploring Teachers' Strategies That Motivate Achievement Among African American Students: A Single Case Study, I have decided to grant you permission to invite our students to participate in your study, with the approve and signature of a parent and/or legal guardian.

I grant permission for Charlie Howell, III to visit the upper elementary classes and invite them to participate in his research study. I agree to send his information to upper elementary students on his behalf. Requested data will be stripped of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.

We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Appendix B

Parental Consent

Title of the Project: Addressing the African American achievement gap: Exploring strategies that attend to their motivational needs.
Principal Investigator: Charlie Howell III, Liberty University, School of Education

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

Your child is invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be between 3 and 6 grades. Charlie Howell III, a doctoral student at Liberty University is conducting this research. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of this multiple-case study is to explore the benefits of the teaching strategies used to address the motivational needs of African American students in southeastern North Carolina. Specifically, the study will look at the way in which teachers have fostered lessons, collaborated and tailored them with self-determination and motivation in mind.

What will participants be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to allow your child be in this study, I would ask him or her to do the following things:

1. [First procedure] Students will be observed in the classroom. During the observation I will be making note of all activities and actions as well as focusing things done to motivate students.
2. [Second procedure] I will collect work documents of strategies used by teachers to motivate students. Documents can include student work samples, anchor charts, and student or teacher notes.
3. [Third procedure] I will conduct semi-structured interviews with participants at the school site. The questions will allow students to expound on motivation and give relevant answers to their learning. The questions will surround the motivation of African American students. All participant identities will remain confidential.

How could participants or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

What risks might participants experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimum. There are no risks outside of the normal day-to-day risks that occur.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected as part of this study may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from the participants

is shared, any information that could identify them, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared. Participant responses will be kept confidential and there will be use of pseudonyms and codes. Data will be stored electronically under a password-protected device, and student journals will be stored in a locked file cabinet. Once information has been transcribed, journals will be shredded to ensure confidentiality. Audio recording will be stored on a password protected and secure device.

How will participants be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study with a $15 gift card after the completion of their interview.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

What should be done if a participant wishes to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw your child from the study or your child chooses to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw her or him or should your child choose to withdraw, data collected from your child will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Charlie Howell III. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at chhowell1@liberty.edu You may also contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email irb@liberty.edu.

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

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

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to allow your child to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

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

_____
Printed Child's/Student's Name

_____
Parent's Signature Date

_____
Minor's Signature Date

Appendix C

Observation Protocol

This protocol was suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Length of Activity: 30 Minutes	
Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
General: What instructional strategies are teachers using to address the motivational needs of African American students? **Note areas of autonomy, competence building, and relatedness.	

Appendix D

Interview Questions

1. Describe yourself: Where were you born? Have you been enrolled in another school before this one?
2. Tell me about the things that you like about school.
3. Describe times in class or school that made it hard to complete a task and made you want to give up.
4. What have your teachers done to help you not give up?
5. What are some of the favorite learning games you have done in school?
6. Tell me a time when you told your teacher about how you want to learn.
7. Tell me a time when your teacher helped you complete an assignment.
8. What lessons have your teachers taught that celebrate your African American culture? How did that make you feel?
9. What were your favorite group activities?

Appendix E

Date: 4-4-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY22-23-49
Title: Exploring Teachers' Strategies That Motivate Achievement Among African American Students: A Single Case Study
Creation Date: 7-14-2022
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: [redacted]
Review Board: [redacted]e
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial	Review Type Expedited	Decision Approved
Submission Type Modification	Review Type Expedited	Decision Approved

Key Study Contacts

Member [redacted]	Role Co-Principal Investigator	Contact s[redacted]
Member [redacted]	Role Principal Investigator	Contact c[redacted]
Member [redacted]	Role Primary Contact	Contact c[redacted]