

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CURRICULAR ENGAGEMENT IN THE SECONDARY  
ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by

Kelsey Leah Baldwin

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University

2024

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### **Abstract**

Educational engagement is an issue that has become problematic due to the many changes that have occurred since COVID, including technological dependency and teacher burnout. Teachers may need more skills to manage and implement engagement strategies in the classroom setting. Understanding educators' experiences with classroom engagement in a variety of secondary English classrooms is the setting of this case study. The central research question explores how educators experience student engagement in their classrooms. The theory guiding this study is Bandura's social cognitive theory, as I utilize the theory to examine behaviors affected by people and the classroom environment. This research uses an intrinsic case study approach throughout high schools to focus on teachers' experiences and means of engagement within their classrooms. I conducted interviews, met with focus groups, and provided teachers with a questionnaire to gauge their experiences with curricular practices and student engagement. I found that educators work to achieve engagement through practices outside of technology, and student engagement directly affects student achievement. My research recognizes the extreme need for engagement in the secondary English classroom, as well as the implications that affect educators and students on a daily basis. My findings highlight the significance of engaging students through instructional practices, relationship-building, and the removal of technology as a focus in the classroom.

*Keywords:* curriculum, engagement, achievement, environment

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## **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to my family for sticking beside me throughout the process. I am thankful for their guidance every step of the way and their patience through the process. I am also grateful for these goals to come to fruition, and, by the grace of God, I finish while keeping my occupation. My love for curriculum and instruction, stemming from my time in the classroom, has inspired me to reach for more in obtaining this degree. With my colleagues and opportunities in schools along the way, I achieved this goal.

My Liberty University professors have inspired me and made me realize that I was never alone every step of the way. Their patience and understanding have been life-changing, and I have felt more fulfilled in my faith because of them. God has kept me grounded through this process, and all things have been possible through Him.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Sub Question One (SQ1)

Sub Question Two (SQ2)

Sub Question Three (SQ3)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Changes in instructional practices, English curriculum, and students' needs have occurred over the last five years resulting in students' lack of engagement and motivation (McMurtrie, 2022; Soneson et al., 2023). Educators see these changes firsthand due to curricular changes and instructional needs of students entering high school. In many cases where students do not show interest, educators express not knowing how to help them learn, find interest, and self-motivate in class (McMurtrie, 2022). The lack of interest in content, as well as many other issues, lead to a decrease in student agency and purpose in core classes (Cooper et al., 2016). Agency, individuals' ability, and motivation to take control over their learning through their decisions and choices, is affected by classroom experiences (Vaughn, 2020). Students seek success for numerous reasons, but the environment created within a classroom can allow students to interact and engage with one another. Engagement leads to agency and growth. While the curriculum differs according to the subject matter, it still is not enough to engage all today's students. Curriculum, in high school English classrooms, lacks responsive and relevant material (Pate et al., 2001). Instead, state standards and test-driven practices are implemented in the majority of classrooms. Much of the pressure falls on educators who must ensure that students meet standards and achieve personal success to graduate and become prominent members of society (Roorda et al., 2017). Educators must be prepared to address the consistent challenges of engaging their students within the classroom.

Chapter one will provide a historical background regarding the connections between student engagement and students' success in the classroom, the resources and development available for educators, and challenges within the school. The chapter will include the research

questions, the purpose of this study, and the significance of this study. Lastly, I will define the critical terms of student achievement and engagement.

### **Background**

Most educators have experienced changes in student engagement (Pinar et al., 1995; Dutt et al., 2020). Students are increasingly faced with learning opportunities that lack meaning and relevance. In turn, students lack willingness and purpose in their actions (Vaughn, 2020). Secondary students need to experience engagement and agency in order to find success in post-secondary preparation and achievement (Dutt et al., 2020). Students should have the ability to become active agents in their learning and transform their lives beyond the classroom (Vaughn, 2020). Persistence and choice-making are key factors in teaching students how to seek opportunities and make decisions when faced with challenges. The lack of engagement and agency is due to various changes, including curriculum changes, instructional practices, changes in the environment due to COVID, and different expectations for educators (Dutt et al., 2020). Following COVID, high schools continue to face absences and a lack of student engagement, and students continue to fail to meet grade-level requirements. Schools struggling with these issues have been working with school psychologists and counselors to implement social-emotional and counseling services for students (Dorn et al., 2021). Although many factors result in the decline of student engagement and purpose, instructional and curricular practices within the classroom environment are significant components of the overall student experience. A successful student achieves academic success and motivation through the curricular content, instructional practices, and educational environment within a classroom.

## **Historical Context**

In 1949, Ralph W. Tyler's curriculum studies and publication of *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* became prominent in education and curriculum design. His approach to education highlighted that teaching and learning techniques and student behaviors collectively determined educational success (Antonelli, 1972; Pinar et al., 1995). There were four driving factors in curriculum development, including defining learning objectives, establishing instructional experiences, organizing experiences to have a cumulative effect, and evaluating and revising the curriculum to make it the most effective (Pinar et al., 1995). This practice allowed educators to establish working instructional plans and welcome collaborative opportunities for teachers and students. The curriculum developers had to consider students' interests and experiences, society's values, and the necessary knowledge of subjects (Antonelli, 1972). The driving factors were to be observed by teachers to determine student behavior and engagement; however, students were not to be participants in their education planning but consumers of the learning (Pinar et al., 1995). It was not until 30 years had passed that Tyler's work was critiqued; therefore, there were not many changes occurring within the world of education for much time. Ultimately, his practices provided teachers with a framework for planning and adapting curricular plans.

## **Social Context**

Students and educators are directly affected by the lack of engagement and its implications on the classroom environment and the learners (Cooper et al., 2016). Beyond the classroom, there is a potential disconnect between curriculum planners and administrators who are not involved in the work and fidelity of implementation. Educators and students will benefit from the amount of purpose and care put into the process when curriculum and instruction are

developed collaboratively and instilled seamlessly into classrooms. Educators should utilize students' engagement to inform and improve their teaching (Cooper et al., 2016). Students are directly affected by the curricular and instructional plans in the classroom. However, teachers need more time and experience a potential lack of resources depending on the school and the teaching experience. Many teachers believe that the lack of engagement within classrooms stems from more than instructional and curricular practices, but it is also a result of technological advancements and the decrease in rigor and academic expectations (McMurtrie, 2022).

Students receive instruction according to objectives within the classroom, but often there are issues beyond the school hindering them from achieving engagement. Engaging strategies allow educators to reach a variety of learners regardless of achievement level. While mastery levels differ for all students, engaging curricular experiences reach students with different behaviors, motivations, and personal aspirations (Ahn et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2016). Teachers must develop a curriculum allowing students to become literate and prepared regardless of circumstances beyond teachers' control.

### **Theoretical Context**

Student engagement has been an issue in education and a significant topic of educational research, and there are many studies that examine student engagement and classroom practices. Lo and Hew (2021) applied theoretical and empirical design to support student engagement and found that certain instructional techniques, such as project-based experiences and flipped learning approach, best support student achievement and engagement. Lo & Hew continued to reflect and produce design principles to best serve students to focus more specifically on students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Teachers would be able to alter the way they deliver material, lead, and facilitate their classrooms, and instruct content matter in

order for instructional practices to establish specific behaviors in their learners and continue to adapt to the changes and expectations of school districts and administrators (Roorta et al., 2017).

The self-determination theory, as studied by Deci and Ryan (2020), examines students' intrinsic and extrinsic experiences affecting motivation (Morley, et al., 2020). When students do not recognize that they have a say and purpose in what or how they are learning, it causes them to lose interest, lack motivation, and lower achievement (Cooper et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2020). To ensure individual and collaborative engagement within the classroom, teachers are tasked with creating a learning framework to create an environment that provides learners with the flexibility and interest to take control of their learning and create their own educational experience, (Recke & Perna, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Introducing student-led and project-based classrooms brings about the idea that students learn best by creating and being involved (Hyman et al., 2022). Because students are likely to be motivated through factors within the classroom, teachers continue to alter their instructional practices as students change, leading students to collaborate, engage, and become the leaders of their learning.

The results of this case study have value for the connections to Kearsley and Schneiderman's (1999) engagement theory and provide a clear understanding of student engagement and motivation. Studying Kearsley and Schneiderman's theory helps educators understand the implications of engagement and how engagement strategies can motivate students within the classroom (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1998). The results of this study lead to researchers' understanding of changes that can be made within secondary English classes to engage students and build overall motivation and achievement within and beyond the classroom (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1998; Tomović, 2021).



## **Changes in Instructional Practices**

Most educators have experienced changes in student engagement for a variety of reasons. In recent years, educators have faced a shift in agency and overall classroom engagement in the secondary English classroom (Dutt et al., 2020). While some of these changes may be due to COVID, technological expectations, and cultural and personal challenges, the effects are affecting educators and students. Technological shifts have changed the way many students learn and communicate. Students may also deal with pressures outside the classroom that affect their agency to do well in school, seeking success beyond the classroom. For educators to connect with students in the school, educators need support and training (Roorda et al., 2017). While most of the curriculum comes from school districts or instructional coaches in or outside of the schools, classroom environments need to consider student body changes, technological advancements, and students' needs and interests before serving traditional models of instruction. Furthermore, if instructional models remain the same, students' ability to excel cannot be accurately measured.

## **The Need for Curricular Change**

Schools in all areas face their specific challenges, but a common expectation is that educators continue to educate and engage with the frequently provided curriculum driven by state tests and canonical literature, specifically in high school English classrooms. Although the curriculum may have further challenges, such as the lack of diversity in material and a disconnect in technological advancements, teachers are to motivate and create strong relationships with students while pushing students to achieve at high levels. When students do not see a personal connection to the material that is implemented within the classroom, it takes an extra effort, made by the teacher, to form connections during lessons. This process is

especially difficult when some strategies, especially technologically-driven games and activities, are no longer pertinent and technology has a strong hold over students and educational institutions (Greener, 2018). While all core classes at the secondary level face challenges, the English curriculum is a significant issue because of the expectations of literature, writing assignments, and discussion-based standards across many school districts. These challenges may create a gap in achievement and lack of engagement to the extent that students are unwilling to participate in their learning and be active agents in the classroom.

### **Social Context**

Students and educators are directly affected by the lack of engagement and its implications on the classroom environment and the learners (Cooper et al., 2016). Beyond the classroom, there is a potential disconnect between curriculum planners and administrators who are not involved in the work and fidelity of implementation. Educators and students benefit from the amount of purpose and care put into the process when curriculum and instruction are developed collaboratively and instilled seamlessly into classrooms. Educators should utilize students' engagement to inform and improve their teaching. Students are directly affected by the curricular and instructional plans in the classroom. Many teachers believe that the lack of engagement within classrooms stems from more than instructional and curricular practices.

Students receive instruction according to objectives within the classroom, but often there are issues beyond the school preventing them from achieving engagement. High school English courses are meant to prepare students for post-secondary pathways. Teachers want students find personal success while they are in school and seek to achieve mastery of content. Recognizing student need benefits educators when designing educational goals and instructional plans (Ahn et

al., 2021). However, curriculum that allows students to become literate and prepared regardless of circumstances beyond teachers' control must be provided.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that high school students need to be engaged in secondary English classes (Hyman et al., 2022). Within the classroom, the lack of engagement may cause behavioral issues; however, it may also lead to a drop in motivation beyond the school (Dutt et al., 2020). Secondary classrooms are where educators see much of the lack of student engagement and agency (Temple, 2009). The lack of scholarly attention to the changes within high school students and classroom learning environments has been problematic over the years, but most recently, it has become a more significant issue due to the changes that have occurred since COVID (Lungu & Lungu, 2021; Westphal et al., 2022). These changes include technological dependency and teacher burnout. At the beginning of the pandemic, instruction was delivered through technology. This consistent presence of technology made many students feel a sense of connectedness that they missed while being out of the classroom. However, even returning to the classroom, students feel just as drawn to their technology (Lungu & Lungu, 2021). Most students spend time on social media or games when on their devices, even though most of their learning platforms remains online, at their fingertips. Following COVID, the changes that were made due to technological advancements and overall mentality that learning can occur online brought significant stress on educators to meet the needs of students. This caused many teachers to leave the profession upon facing burnout (Lungu & Lungu, 2021; Westphal et al., 2022). The teacher shortage resulted in having more students to educate with limited resources (Westphal et al., 2022).

Furthermore, such changes in classroom structure resulted in changes in student behavior and a lack of motivation (Towlson et al., 2020). Since some teachers need to prepare for shifts in curriculum and technology offerings, the teachers could use collaboration and developmental opportunities to benefit themselves and their students (Dutt et al., 2020). Developing engagement strategies can also alter how the curriculum is designed and utilized in the classroom. Ultimately, collaborative learning by teachers and students benefits all involved, including teachers throughout different subject areas (Hyman et al., 2022; Sund & Gericke, 2020). Since recent literature alludes to educator instruction and curricular engagement playing a significant role in student agency and achievement, it is necessary to establish a framework following student engagement and success depending on classes and instructional practices.

Through an examination of student engagement, student behavior, and student achievement, this study reveals teachers' experiences and perceptions about student engagement and changes that have occurred since their first year of teaching. This study explores teachers' perceptions of classroom engagement and obtains ideas for enhancing engagement in a technology-driven English classroom. By interviewing teachers, organizing focus groups, and asking teachers to complete a survey, the thoughts of teachers who have taught for at least one year in secondary English classrooms are explored in this study. Since many schools experience turnover, I utilize the ideas of new and veteran educators to compare the challenges and changes that have occurred between 2019 and 2023. The problem of disengagement in the secondary English classroom is not new, but I state the changes that have occurred in students' lives over the last five years. This study adds to the literature regarding student engagement because of the perspectives that teachers provided.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this case study is to understand how educators support student engagement and agency in secondary English classrooms. The perceptions of teachers regarding engagement and practices they utilize in the classroom are investigated through this study. Factors that improve engagement and lead to student success are recognized through this research. The desired outcome of this case study is that factors leading to disengagement in the classroom are recognized, and enhancing educational practices become a goal for school districts. At this stage in the research, student engagement is generally defined as agency, interest, and degree of attention in the classroom. The interest and degree of students' attention in a class emphasize the content and instructional practices, as well as students' current educational experiences in the classroom.

### **Significance of the Study**

As teachers establish instructional strategies and best practices, classrooms become more student-led, focusing on building agency, engagement, and student achievement. Educators recognize that there is a multitude of challenges facing their classrooms. While challenges stem from external factors, there are also technology and classroom practices that establish the environment necessary to help students excel. There is a significant amount of research on how classroom engagement strategies benefit all types of learners (Cooper et al., 2016; Hyman et al., 2022). Still, there is not as much research on secondary English teachers' procedures and experiences within the classroom. In this case study, high school English teachers describe their experiences and strategies to enhance engagement within their classrooms and how they help create a positive, consistent learning environment. This case study shows how classroom

engagement in secondary English classrooms supports Kearsley and Schneiderman's (1999) engagement theory and expands upon current literature on student engagement.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The results of this case study have significance for the connections to Kearsley and Schneiderman's (1999) engagement theory, as well as Bandura's social cognitive theory. Studying Kearsley and Schneiderman's theory helps educators understand the implications of engagement and how engagement strategies can motivate students within the classroom (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1998). The results of this study also leads to researchers' understanding of changes that can be made within secondary English classes to engage students and build overall motivation and achievement within and beyond the classroom (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1998; Tomović, 2021).

### **Empirical Perspective**

Engagement is necessary in educating students and providing quality instruction that allows students to succeed in secondary English classes and beyond secondary-level classes has been identified in research (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Moote et al., 2021). Student engagement has changed due to changes in routine, expectations, and curricular expectations (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). There is a lack of research regarding student engagement and classroom expectations in secondary English classes specifically; however, there is a significant amount of research detailing engagement strategies and the effects of age and gender in online learning, as well as academic engagement (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Wang & Hofkens, 2020). Similarly, the strategies alter significantly from elementary and middle school to secondary school due to changes in developmental and social contexts (Wang & Hofkens, 2020). This case study adds to the existing research by understanding teachers' experiences in secondary English classrooms

and how their experiences contribute to the success and changes necessary to establish greater student engagement.

### **Practical Perspective**

By studying high school English educators and the curricular and instructional practices expected of teachers, educators participating in the study identified ways to enhance engagement practices and make changes, as necessary, to make classroom practices purposeful. Also, other secondary English educators are able to use the information collected from participants to compare experiences and learn from practices that are working or not working in creating an engaging classroom. For educators working to build engagement practices to increase student agency, this study explains different classroom scenarios and demographics to incorporate strategies to increase motivation and engagement in individual students. School administrators can utilize the results of this case study to create professional learning opportunities or to deliver best practices to school educators to motivate educators and further motivate students.

### **Research Questions**

There has always been a demand for student engagement in the classroom, specifically in reviewing assessment practices (Harris et al., 2018). The central research question explores how educators support student engagement. Furthermore, the following questions help communicate educators' experiences and perceptions of student engagement, agency, and instructional practices within the classroom.

#### **Central Research Question**

How do educators support student engagement in the secondary English classroom?

#### **Sub-Question One**

How do students' behaviors affect engagement in the secondary English classroom?

### **Sub-Question Two**

How does the classroom environment affect student engagement in the secondary English classroom?

### **Sub-Question Three**

How do curriculum and instruction affect student engagement in the secondary English classroom?

### **Definitions**

1. *Agency* - Agency is students' intentional and reflective interactions within their environments (Klemencic, 2015).
2. *Curriculum* - Curriculum is an adaptable concept that various people in various levels and departments continuously construct. Curriculum has continued to change due to the complex educational shifts and decisions being made. Further, the curriculum is a means to achieve goals and objectives (Su, 2012).
3. *Engagement* - Engagement is the involvement, interest, and connectedness to classes, other students, peers, and schools (Axelson & Flick, 2010).
4. *Motivation* - Motivation is the reasoning and purpose for students to act, react, initiate, or behave a certain way. It is affected by internal and external forces, such as success or peers (Ahn et al., 2021).

### **Summary**

This chapter reviews curricular and instructional practices and the implications regarding student engagement and agency. This qualitative case study is used to understand teachers' perceptions of student engagement. The purpose of this case study is to understand how educators support engagement and agency in secondary English classrooms. One major research



question and three sub-questions are utilized to guide research. The theoretical framework for this study includes the constructivist approach and the self-determination theory. While this study has external stakeholders, the central figures include teachers and students, with the curricular plans in place by instructional coaches or administrative-level curriculum developers. Upon completion of this study, the findings allow teachers to establish a framework for curricular and instructional plans to engage, motivate, and seek achievement for each student in the secondary English classroom. Educators' experiences were needed to understand the teacher-student relationships, classroom environments, and the difficulties in their classrooms.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

In the systematic literature review, I explore teachers' experiences with curriculum, engagement, and student success in secondary English classes. This chapter offers a review of the research on this topic. The first section discusses Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) and Deci & Ryan's self-determination theory (2020), followed by a review of recent literature regarding curricular changes over the years, instructional methods, and students' and teachers' challenges and successes within the classroom. Last, the literature surrounding teachers' understanding and perceptions of curricular and instructional engagement and agency is discussed. Finally, a gap in the literature is identified regarding teachers' knowledge concerning alterations in curriculum and instruction and how they can effectively make changes to benefit most student in secondary English classes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this qualitative case study, I utilize the theoretical framework to guide and support research. In this study, Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) is used as a guide to understand how human behaviors are determined by a person and their environment (Schunk & Usher, 2012). Since social environments alter experiences, it is necessary to ensure that personal values and self-efficacy align with desired outcomes and behaviors. Opportunities to discuss engagement strategies and understand implementation allows a thorough understanding of teachers' roles in engagement and agency, curriculum implementation, and teachers' expectations of students. The results of this study provide educators with information regarding how environmental, behavioral, and personal factors primarily affect student behavior (Mujahidah & Yusdiana, 2023; Schunk & Usher, 2012).

## **Social Cognitive Theory in Prior Research**

There is a plethora of research utilizing Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) as a guiding research framework. This theory provides that modeling is significant for students' learning experiences, but that there is also an amount of self-regulation that must be learned to be a successful student (Mujahidah & YUSDIANA, 2023). Ultimately, the experience and expectations of a classroom can prepare students to be active, willing learners. Schunk and Usher (2012) included that students who feel they perform well in a class are likelier to engage in a classroom activity. Further, teacher instruction and collaborative opportunities directly influence student engagement and efforts. Teachers' engagement strategies and instructional methods support students' motivation and achievement. Similarly, this case study examines Bandura's social cognitive theory, focusing on environmental and social experiences shaping students' overall success in secondary English classes. Since students influence classmates and are influenced by classmates, the social cognitive theory addresses how such behaviors are shaped within a learning environment (Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022). Martin (2004) focused on self-regulation and classroom structural changes, such as less teacher-led instruction, to benefit students' engagement. Guiding student agency through learning skills and self-control will make classroom experiences more positive and help students become motivated and willing to be active agents in their learning. Educators who set out to engage students utilizing instructional methods support student success, agency, and self-efficacy, which are all significant to this study.

Lopez et al. (1997) recognized how academic interest and performance were gleaned from Bandura's social cognitive theory. Self-efficacy and interest in the subject matter often allude to the received grades in a course (Lopez et al., 2017). By allowing students to gain

interest through instructional activities, teachers will support students' needs by focusing on sound and optimizing class time with engaging practices. Smith and Fouad (1999) investigated the subject-matter specificity of students' interests, goals, and personal expectations. Students show a greater chance of setting goals and expectations when engaged and achieving within a particular subject matter, offering a direct relation between self-efficacy and interests. Because students achieve at higher levels when they are interested in a subject matter, it is beneficial for teachers to build relationships with students to help the engagement process (Martin, 2004; Smith and Fouad, 1999).

### **Social Cognitive Theory in Current Research**

Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) provides a framework for this case study, as it relates to multiple internal and external factors that affect student behavior and motivation. Understanding student behaviors within a classroom will allow educators to recognize challenges and changes needing to occur to implement practices that could benefit student experiences and increase engagement within the school. While some consistent issues challenging the social cognitive theory include diversity and cultural changes, Bandura's theory has room for future growth in concepts and integration of technology (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). In more current research, the focus on motivation and social aspects of student behavior are somewhat dependent on reinforcement and relationships surrounding the student. Similarly, most related research surrounding Bandura's social cognitive theory centers on the idea that individuals can achieve positive outcomes with supportive environments, peer relationships, and opportunities.

Prior research showed that engagement has been studied extensively, specifically regarding the changes needing to be made to meet the needs of individual learners. While individual learners pose the issue that intrinsic factors alter classroom experiences, there needs to

be more research that reviews current topics in classroom engagement due to the standard secondary English curriculum and instructional methods provided by educators. This study looks at all aspects of student engagement and instructional practices to enhance student learning through Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986). The research questions guiding this study are relative to Bandura's social cognitive theory framework, focusing on environment, behavior, and cognitive factors. The central and sub-research questions will be utilized to craft interviews, focus groups, and survey questions to implement each component of the social cognitive theory.

### **Related Literature**

#### **Curricular Engagement**

Two prominent themes throughout the reviewed literature include student and teacher engagement and overall well-being. Continuous education is necessary for students and educators to thrive in environments within and outside the classroom (Munir & Zaheer, 2021). Observably, many students do not aspire to continue their education past a point due to a lack of engagement, motivation, and achievement at the high school level. This creates issues in developing curriculum to prepare students beyond the classroom, as many of them do lose interest that carry over into their lives outside of the classroom. Also, higher achieving students utilize resources available to support their learning in order to excel, while students who are at a disadvantage do not properly use resources, such as technology, to enhance their learning, creating greater disparities at the secondary level (Bergdahl et al., 2020). Since student and teacher engagement allows for developmental progress and curricular achievement, research and findings offer educators new ideas to implement to improve and consistently challenge curriculum and engagement (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Munir & Zaheer, 2021). Educators continue their education on their own time, and the provided curriculum is not always readily

usable when it comes to implementing effective and engaging lessons. Therefore, it takes time to create methods of practice to best serve students in order to make them life-long learners. While motivations are often intrinsic for educators to constantly improve their craft, their efforts to create engaging lessons and instructional practices make students' experiences more fulfilling.

Furthermore, students' academic achievement and lifelong success stem from the relationships and security within a classroom (Plakhotnik et al., 2021; Munir, S., & Zaheer, 2021). Educators' utilization of instructional and developmental strategies, as well as team-building opportunities, can impact students' overall well-being and feeling of acceptance within the school. Once relationships are built and a safe climate is established, collaborative opportunities can take place with the facilitation of educators. Effectively implemented, learning through collaboration can improve individual performance and achievement, ultimately benefitting teachers and students in all subject areas (Purnamasari et al., 2021; Sund & Gericke, 2020). Utilizing resources in the classroom to create educational opportunities for students can make a difference in students' efforts, regardless of content. Despite many teachers experiencing consistent changes throughout the years, including the years of the COVID pandemic, findings show that many teachers are willing to do what it will take to remain educators and improve their craft (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020). Because of the constant changes and expectations of technology and COVID-adopted programs to be utilized extensively in many districts, teachers feel that it is a challenge to keep up with the navigation and incorporation of these platforms. Educators work to make in-class and at-home learning experiences comfortable and beneficial for students, so in providing innumerable resources, high school students recognize the load that teachers face, as well. In examining the efforts of educators in acclimating to a multitude of

student changes, schoolwide expectations, and curricular updates, the agency and warmth from educators is one of the driving factors in establishing student engagement.

Student and teacher engagement has been reviewed extensively; however, students' well-being and agency are determined by more factors than what happens within a classroom. The multifaceted journey to understanding student and teacher engagement brings the idea that curriculum and learning are a linear approach all should experience. In teaching different dimensions and thematically driven units to accomplish the needs within a content-based classroom, students' energy must be used to engage in purposeful activities and learning; otherwise, students are merely customers of teachers (Singh, 2019; Sund & Gericke, 2020). Students' well-being also is, in part, determined by their learning environments online and in-person, but learning and engaging through student-teacher interaction can occur effectively regardless of the learning model (Dutt et al., 2020; Plakhotnik et al., 2021). This systematic study can contribute to the research in education to remedy the educational challenges many teachers face in engaging students. However, it can also improve understanding and build a toolbox for educators needing to effectively obtain and utilize curricular strategies. Moreover, reviewing engagement strategies and curricular changes must be discussed and implemented collaboratively to gauge understanding and usage. Engagement stems from students' active participation in the classroom and leads to positive changes in academics and socialization (Munir & Zaheer, 2021). If done correctly, relational opportunities will set educators up for success, allowing students to learn how to communicate. Specifically, secondary English classrooms have many opportunities to build participation and establish collaborative interactions.

### *Expectations of Secondary English Classrooms*

Student engagement has been an issue for educators for many years. With significant changes in technological advances and curricular expectations occurring each school year, engagement has become challenging to maintain in secondary classrooms. Teachers are expected to implement inclusive teaching practices that target a variety of learners and needs (Schwab et al., 2021). Regardless of the student, engagement may be affected due to the level of achievement expected, lack of interest in the classroom, or lack of relationships. Still, teacher support is critical to work toward improving student engagement, understanding, and interaction (Xu et al., 2020). Since behavioral and content engagement is higher when facilitated by an educator, there becomes a greater issue when schools lack the staffing and curricular plans not suited to improve student engagement. The discussions, classroom practices, and overall experience in high school classrooms should be created with the goal of students attending college or navigating a career upon graduation. Ideally, many high school students are regularly motivated to take college courses, obtain high grades and accolades, and usually attend college upon graduation. However, more recently, studies show that almost half of the students leave college without getting a degree (Austin, 2020; Guzman & King, 2018). Not only is higher education a difficult time to navigate for students transitioning from high school, but students also report feeling ill-prepared to succeed in some of the core classes expected of them in college (Williams & Roberts, 2023). On the other hand, students who take dual enrollment and college-readiness courses in high school tend to have higher levels of success in college (Kremer, 2022). These students who attend college-preparatory secondary settings often do well in a collegiate environment and achieve a degree due to their prior academic preparations, as well as their obtained structural and organizational practices (Austin, 2020). Ultimately, while a major goal is



to prepare students for college and career readiness, another significant goal of high school educators is to engage students while they are present and build relationships strong enough to withhold some of the challenges that they will come to face.

These different situations, along with different styles of learners, present challenges within diverse secondary classrooms. The core curriculum, specifically for English courses, allows for different strategies and modifications to be put in place according to students' interests and proficiency. Students' academic track heavily depends on courses taken and student interest in course offerings. On the other hand, if students have specific needs or are failing to complete core classes at mastery, they do not have the ability to take other courses that could be more engaging to them (Collyns, 2021). This challenges students who need the space to learn differently or experience different extracurriculars, but it also may lead to a multitude of modifications needed within classrooms of core subjects. However, intentional engagement through teaching and other forms of academic support are not considered to determine the impact on college readiness and success (Guzman & King, 2018; Onuoha et al., 2021). There are many barriers that alter the level of students' readiness, and some remain unknown to educators. More recently, students at some schools are leaving high schools without college readiness and skills to adapt becoming self-sufficient outside of high school (Kanno, 2018; Schwab et al., 2021). It is argued instead that students with strengths and talents in other areas should be able to utilize them within their learning processes and will, in turn, become ready to take on a career (Kanno, 2018). Accepting students at different levels and growing them to discover possibilities and areas of interest will allow them to recognize opportunities available to them. Although there are challenges beyond the classroom and different levels of student achievement, best practices will continue to differ according to student and school.

### *Common Practice*

Presently, and especially following the changes in learning due to the COVID pandemic, educators face a significant lack of student engagement and agency due to online learning platforms, classroom structure changes, and student behavior. These challenges result in a lack of motivation and unease but also bring up a concern with the lack of mindfulness and conflict resolution that many adolescents recognized following the pandemic (Calma-Birling & Zelazo, 2022; Towlson et al., 2020). Not only are students continuing to feel concerns regarding their personal lives, but they also recognize potential changes in their education and future because of the challenges of the pandemic (Calma-Birling & Zelazo, 2022). The specific learning environment, in-person or online, heavily influences student engagement. Students must be engaged through networking strategies, collaboration, and connectedness to navigate and fully experience the current world in which they live (Abacioglu et al., 2019; Towlson et al., 2020). Many educators have adapted to these changes while working through practices to keep students feeling secure and having a purpose in digital and in-seat instruction. Although with the changes occurring, there also come opportunities for online learning. Until the COVID pandemic, online learning to this extent was not entirely possible; however, the development of new programs and platforms makes it feasible to learn strictly online. While the diversity of students also plays a role in classroom engagement and instruction, teachers' openness and guidance in student learning play a positive role in student engagement rather than in a strict, controlling environment (Patall et al., 2022). Online and in-person classes bring different strategies to students, but students will continue to succeed if teachers provide instruction to develop interest. Beyond online learning, the consistency of approaches in secondary classrooms brings students a sense of camaraderie and comfort. Students lack interest in secondary English courses, but

establishing exterior motives and active, goal-driven instruction with emotional involvement will allow positive outcomes within secondary classrooms, according to both students' and teachers' perceptions (Abacioglu et al., 2019; Patall et al., 2022).

There are also shifts in instructional practices implemented by school districts to create student-centered opportunities within secondary classrooms (Keleşzade et al., 2018). Teacher-centered methods were no longer prominent when the pandemic allowed specific, student-driven learning. The COVID pandemic brought about many different innovations and digital practices that were new to teachers and students. While most of the teaching and learning took place in a classroom setting before these changes were made, it suddenly made aspects of learning easier and more convenient (Darling-Aduana et al., 2022). In turn, these changes caused conversations regarding the quality of education and the need for more meaningful, available, and student-focused learning (Otto et al., 2023). The changes made in instructional practices allowed many students to learn solely through online platforms. Because this allowed for overall greater accessibility, including students carrying jobs while attending school and students looking to take part in competitive extracurriculars, most schools continued to develop online platforms and further opportunities for all students. Many students choosing to stay online due to the need for technology and digitized instructional methods took ownership of their education, even opting to remain online or challenge themselves with courses beyond their required load. Prior to COVID, students had minimal opportunities to receive online instruction, including if they needed credit recovery, wanted to take summer courses, or wanted advanced learning. When provided with instructional opportunities following COVID, many students and their families had a greater interest in remaining fully online, especially since schools and online platforms had improved significantly from the emergency start of online pandemic learning (Darling-Aduana et al.,

2022). Further, online learners may provide benefits to students who remain in-person learning, resulting in smaller class sizes and fewer distractions. With virtual learning being an opportunity for all students regardless of achievement level, the hope is still for all students to have enhanced educational experiences in school. Regardless of students' educational environments, the goal will remain for students to strive for continuous learning throughout their high school and post-secondary education, not just pass an assessment or score a high grade (Keleşzade et al., 2018). Technology and virtual platforms will allow for the desired curriculum to be delivered fluidly to all students regardless of location and ability.

### **Common Core Standards and Paradigm Shifts**

The current practices are incorporated into high school English classrooms to fit the needs of the Common Core Standards. Common Core, expectations, and guidelines for students' expectations of knowledge and skillsets needed by the time they graduate high school, were to maintain a common curriculum for subject matters in all states (Porter et al., 2011). The Common Core Standards allowed many states to adapt and involve teachers in continued education, training, and assessments aligned to standards for an idea of accuracy and measurement of teacher success and student growth (Coburn et al., 2016). However, Common Core also became troublesome due to the demands within the classroom and proficiency of individuals (Porter et al., 2011). For example, Common Core places higher demands on student writing, which requires extensive teacher instruction and practice (Smith et al., 2013). Additionally, teacher instruction requires more professional development in order to implement the curriculum with fidelity, and some of the writing standards may also be too demanding for struggling writers (Troia & Graham, 2016). This not only threatens teacher comfortability, but it also affects student engagement, being that not all students will excel, along with the

expectations of the Common Core Standards. Understandably, out of 36 writing instruction and assessment practices, not all standards are covered extensively in each grade. Educators performing lessons according to all standards could take more time. Common Core is to serve as a baseline for students' achievement throughout the course of their school careers to make them college and career ready, and although that alone is a positive aspect, there are also drawbacks in resources, student readability, teacher expectations, and professional development opportunities.

Although Common Core is still prominent in many states, there are states that find difficulty in holding students accountable. There is also a concern regarding what students should learn by the time of graduation, as well as what they should learn to meet the requirements of the state tests (Coburn et al., 2016). Since many states use Common Core as a general guide and framework, there are goals set for students to master each school year. However, student accountability is difficult to maintain because of the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, extreme absences, and lack of interest in different subject matters (Wade, 2023). During COVID, when students were expected to attend virtually, many did not have the resources to do so and most students across the nation stayed logged out (Goldstein et al., 2020). However, following the pandemic, schools faced a heightened lack of agency when it came to students attending classes (Goldstein et al., 2020; Wade, 2023). For example, in a larger Midwest school district, data from the 2021-2022 school year showed a lack of attendance, where 67% of students attended school at least 90% of the year (KOMU 8). While this is due to a variety of factors including fewer expectations schools place on students, there is also a larger amount of high school students experiencing extreme anxiety years after the onset of COVID (Wade, 2023; Yin et al., 2022). The long-term impact of COVID on students' mental health is under investigation, but almost half of high school students in 2021 reported experiencing poor mental

health (Yin et al., 2022). Since students have experienced restrictions, modifications of schedules, isolation, and consistent challenges in their worlds of education, school districts and educators remain indifferent to the enforcement of educational expectations. Having led to a series of changes, including assignments, meeting times, delivery of content, and students' completion of assignments, administration and teachers still seek to obtain consistency in classroom procedures and curriculum (Vahle et al., 2023). Considering the demands for many schools to incorporate Standard Operating Procedures, Common Core is a step for many toward the direction of consistency; however, it will take time and careful implementation to ensure that students today benefit from it.

Comparatively, school districts also have different expectations for educators, or lack thereof, which challenges the shifts in curriculum development and the need for consistency. When teachers begin their careers, they are expected to have the college education and student teaching experience that they have completed. However, due to a major teacher shortage, there are currently many programs that allow educators to onboard without these extensive requirements. Now, even more so, if school districts had programs or mentors in place for new educators, it could help with retention and building common knowledge around the expectations and demands needed to succeed in a school (Nahal, 2009). This process would allow districts to design their manuals accordingly and ensure that all teachers coming in would be equipped with all the information needed to feel successful and stay in the classroom, since many teachers describe the first year of teaching as a *sink or swim* situation. Such consistency of expectations would correspond with curricular consistency and alignment, which could be a goal for districts once teacher retention strategies are in place.

## *Issues*

The continuous shift of curricular expectations in many districts poses an issue due to overworked educators, lack of training and pay, and consistent changes in the curriculum instead of adopting and adapting to fit the needs of schools and districts. Educators have adopted Common Core State Standards all over the country; however, there are also concerns that the standards need shifting to make sure students are college and career ready. These standards will continue changing curriculum and instructional practices (Wallender, 2014). Specifically, Common Core Standards and grade level standards are not the same, which challenges the consistency needed at all grade levels (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012). For educators to implement these standards most effectively, it is necessary for them to understand the structure of Common Core Standards extensively. The idea is that these standards are complemented by well-developed curriculum plans to engage and practice strategies to have each student excel. Common Core Standards serve as a blueprint of expectations according to grade level and subject, but the work a teacher must complete to make the curriculum effective on all levels will take time. Therefore, in the time it takes to make changes to a curriculum, there also needs to be time set aside for educators to receive the training and resources needed to implement such practices. While not all the standards may be covered each year, or districts have their own desired plan in place, it may be difficult to expect the same blueprint to be covered by all classroom educators. Oftentimes, the planning and collaborating take place outside of contract time or during planning periods, and teachers are not always paid for their efforts. Since the push of Common Core Standards calls for student inquiry, analysis, and deeper examination, many educators found that teaching in this way was different and exciting, but also overwhelming and challenging (McLaughlin et al., 2014). There continues to be consequences of the consistent

implementation of Common Core, as there have been greater means of collaboration and the establishment of contacts outside of individual school buildings. While this is a positive outcome, there remain issues with funding districts evenly when many areas still lack the staffing necessary to serve students across all grade levels. The goal of reaching curricular consistency is a work in progress. As curricular consistency demands extreme efforts by educators and administrators especially, students beyond the classroom and into their careers will reap the benefits from the work being done to ensure that curriculum fits the needs of students' college and career aspirations.

### **Secondary Students**

Students' interests in high school differ; many factors can determine their interest in classes. When students' needs are supported and satisfied, regardless of culture and background, they find comfort in knowing they are in a safe and secure learning environment (Leite et al., 2018; Patall et al., 2022). The setting, one major factor shaping secondary students' experiences in the classroom, is followed by curricular choices and the intensity of the material and instructional methods (Austin, 2020). Students face challenges throughout their high school careers, but one major issue is that they are expected to leave high school and become agents of change within society. However, their classroom experiences in high school do not offer a practical education that is easily translatable to the real world (Vare, 2021). While the intensity of the curriculum benefits a majority of students at the secondary school age as college preparations are being made, it also continues to create a gap between those who are preparing to learn at a higher rate and those who are not aiming to achieve beyond a classroom grade. Some secondary schools focus on educational achievement through consistent, high-stakes exams to push students to succeed to a higher degree. Secondary schools that do not focus heavily on



achievement but expect students to graduate do not necessarily offer engaging curricular content and engagement strategies. The disconnect between the different types of high schools could lessen if curricular engagement were the focus for all schools, creating higher student achievement levels.

Ultimately, there is a divide between high schoolers working on learning and succeeding at a higher level and those who find classroom material needing revision. Along with classroom interactions, there is also a connection between students' achievement and engagement levels and their socioeconomic status. Another study found that lower engagement and achievement levels are directly connected to students with low socioeconomic status (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Many high schools are zoned, which could also be why there is an overall expectation set for students before attending the school. While these schools remain in areas that affect student engagement for outside reasons, there are also influences by administrators, teachers, and instructional practices that could impact the expectations placed on students at such high schools.

### ***Agency***

Student agency is the chance and capability to act, influence, and change the trajectory and conditions in their own lives (Grazia et al., 2021). This idea of agency could allow students to work alongside teachers, providing students with opportunities to have preferences and offer suggestions to be active members of their educational experiences. Opportunities to interact, as educators, with students to question them and gauge interest, are necessary for supporting student agency (Vaughn, 2020). However, schools struggling with diverse challenges or inequality have a lower amount of agency present in classrooms. The agency determines student success in many instances, and students who lack this quality are less engaged in the classroom environment. However, the agency can be established by building teacher-student relationships,

as teachers can directly hinder student agency by limiting opportunities and a space to interact and learn (Grazia et al., 2021). The high school environment and needs of adolescent learners have led to further disengagement in the classroom, and since a school environment continuously shapes students, it is important that students have the chance to experience self-efficacy, further leading to greater engagement and personal achievement (Anderson et al., 2019).

Disconnection can also occur when students need to take ownership of their learning. Still, it also may happen when educators need more involvement and necessary preparation for students in the classroom. While it is recognized that teacher involvement and enthusiasm affect students' experiences, it is also believed that students' ownership and actions, as well as students and teachers sharing in the decision-making process, are necessary components to build engagement in the classroom environment (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Vare, 2021). Student agency develops when a personal interest or investment is involved, but also when there are efforts to bridge the gap between what is learned and what still needs to be learned in a classroom. As students create their learning plans, they should understand what, how, and when they will learn the necessary learning objectives to meet the requirements and seek achievement within the classroom. The agency requires an understanding of goals and how to obtain them, but many students have not been informed of their course options in high school. Factors that benefit students' agency include allowing them to be active learners and agents in the learning process and develop understanding through actively performing tasks (Lai & Campbell, 2018; Svensson et al., 2020). For students to appreciate the core content of classes, they must also be invited to make decisions in the classroom. With many changes occurring in the way students best learn, it is important to recognize the impact of technology and the means of connectedness that many adolescents feel, especially following the COVID pandemic (Wade, 2023).

### ***Impact of Social Media and Devices***

All students have a need for devices, especially when they are using them daily in the classrooms. The constant feeling of needing phones is something that will continue to alter the way and the extent to which students learn and retain information. However, secondary students have depended on applications to socialize, complete assignments, take part in virtual learning, and communicate with others on a larger scale (Yan, 2021). Devices and technology provide availability and endless opportunities to digitize instruction, but there are issues with creating consistent expectations within the classroom and determining how devices should be used to benefit learning, communication, and learning (Bowman et al., 2022; Nikolopoulou, 2020). Creating engaging opportunities for secondary students often includes the use of technology, especially after the increase of applications during the COVID pandemic in order to keep learning experiences consistent online. Allowing devices in the classroom increases student motivation and interest and has also allowed for students to control their learning and be independent in the differentiation opportunities presented to them. For this to occur, teachers must change the way they teach to prepare students for the continual technological changes (Dias & Victor, 2022). Implementing professional development opportunities and providing access to technology benefits teachers' experience with device usage in their classrooms, but the culture and vision of individual schools could affect how some educators perceive the use of devices in their classrooms (Bowman et al., 2022). Because devices can also bring about major problems and distractions, it is crucial for educators to understand the implications and build strategies to incorporate technology fluidly into daily routines. Students' needs will vary, and devices should be used to benefit their learning experiences.

### *Diversity of Students*

As years pass, technology changes, schools' expectations change, and the student population at all schools becomes more diverse. Today, sensitivity and awareness of diversity are more important because of the strong beliefs consistently shared online (Cruz, 2019). When such changes occur throughout schools, the one place that educators can take control is in how they teach and build relationships inside of their classrooms. Diversity allows students to hold attributes that make them unique in comparison to others, and in accepting a diverse classroom environment, educators can expand their perspectives and allow students to share beliefs, practices, and interactions with others (Tiwarim, 2022). As this would be a positive practice for schools to maintain, in many institutions, diverse student populations are continuously neglected, and some classrooms do not expose students to opportunities and possibilities to excel, according to their interests and experiences (Cruz, 2019; Tiwarim, 2022). Students attending public schools according to zone seek opportunities, as all students do, but schools are not always prepared to receive diverse students. In order to account for the continuous shift in student population, schools should create a diversity plan to view student diversity and set goals for educator achievement in meeting the needs of all individuals (Cruz, 2019). Allowing and adapting to these many changes will enhance the learning experience for high school students, but it also poses challenges to other students and teachers in the process of differentiation required in classrooms (Nishina et al., 2019). The content of classrooms places responsibility on teachers and school leaders to alter teaching methods and learning experiences that meet the needs of a diverse group of students (Igu et al., 2020). Not only do teachers have to be aware of the many different learners in their classes, but since the required curriculum in many school districts is not diverse in nature, there will need to be alterations and supplemental experiences developed in order to

navigate the changes in student body that come about each school year. Many students attend public institutions in which they are zoned, and staffing will determine the number of resources available for schools to best service such diverse populations. However, in private institutions, educators deal with a less diverse and smaller student population oftentimes due to the cost it takes to attend. Furthermore, with public schools serving more diverse students, it is necessary for high school classrooms to have technology, well-trained educators, and a diversified, engaging curriculum to best serve the needs of all students.

Unfortunately, since the curriculum adopted years ago has not changed to mirror the diverse changes in the classroom, many students leave high school feeling discouraged, disengaged, and ill-prepared to attend college or enter the workforce. Specifically in the secondary English classroom, the reading and writing curriculum allow for students to practice careful analysis and summary, but it is argued that these skills do not correlate to some of the college and real-life situations that students will soon face upon graduation. For example, the literary canon is still prominently taught in many secondary English classrooms (Kaufmann-Buhler et al., 2019). While some schools argue that canonical texts should remain in high school English classrooms due to the literary merit of many of them and the themes throughout such texts, most books in the canon are examples of whiteness and fail to recognize a more universal picture of race and culture especially prominent in classrooms today (Truman, 2019). In these classrooms, literature should be taught to generate experiences and inspire students; however, English literature in schools is told from the perspective of White people, further making it difficult for students to relate unless told to do so (Truman, 2019). High school English classrooms should be fostering an enjoyment of reading at the least, and some of the practices in classrooms are reversing students' interest in reading overdone (Thompson & McIlroy, 2019).

While the literary canon still holds great value, something needs to be done to help students engage with it if it is here to stay (Thompson & McIlnay, 2019; Truman, 2019). If the opportunity presents itself to incorporate other means of literature, educators can address the issue by looking at what motivates students, obtaining access to different texts, including film and graphics, and rebuilding some of the curricula that have been overlooked and overdone (Thompson & McIlnay, 2019). Many changes that have taken place affect students' reading engagement, but the choices of text that are often provided lead to discouragement and loss of interest in core subjects, such as English. If most students are also culturally diverse, the lack of textual options allowed in the classroom would pose more difficulty in engagement and achievement. In order to accommodate the needs of all learners, especially students who are English language learners, extensive differentiated instruction and educator preparedness need to take place (Neckerman, 2007). Furthermore, not all schools in districts have equal opportunities, technology, and staffing. Some schools in rural areas have comfortable classrooms, technology to suit students' needs, and educators trained to educate and ensure that they strive for mastery. However, schools that reside inside a city, or under-performing area, deal with crowded classrooms, a lack of expectation, and inexperienced educators to fill positions, while students continue to perform below grade level (Neckerman, 2007). Such issues continue to plague classrooms until schools determine to change alongside their environments and student needs.

Along with the curriculum remaining similar each year, there is also an issue with accountability when it comes to passing students to another grade before determining that mastery has been achieved. While it is necessary for greater learning to take place by ensuring that standards are met and mastery achieved before allowing students to pass, it is also necessary to recognize that every student has a different level of mastery (Pritchett & Beatty, 2015). Most

of what is covered in a school year is to meet the needs of a syllabus and allow students who are behind to stay behind. This not only creates issues for students who are moving to the next grade level without the knowledge base to succeed, but it also is problematic that students are achieving below mastery but are still given more work to complete. With the increase of virtual learning during and following COVID, more students who are learning virtually prior to graduation have a lower chance of preparedness following graduation; however, students who are already behind and need credit recovery have a higher chance to pass online courses to meet the graduation requirements (Hart et al., 2019). This poses a major issue when it comes to checking for mastery and allowing students to pass to the next grade level before ensuring their college or career readiness. Virtually and in-person, meeting students where they are, as in No Child Left Behind, holds teachers to unspoken standards as well. When it comes to collecting and grading work, educators and administrators work to establish an ideal graduate and gauge students based on their decisions. As students fall short of grade level and graduation requirements, there are often ways a student can still make the grade (Goldstein et al., 2020). Educators continue to work and meet students where they are, but with the number of changes that have occurred in the classrooms over the last five years, the ideal picture of a high school graduate has shifted as well.

### **Role of Educators in Engagement and Achievement**

Educator enthusiasm, by definition, has changed over time, but it remains a necessary motivational and behavioral characteristic (Dewaele & Li, 2021). This enthusiasm is transmitted from teacher to student to improve engagement and agency. It is important that teachers promote student interactions, support learners, and utilize effective instructional delivery in order to successfully develop students (Havik & Westergård, 2020). Although much of the pressure falls

on educators in teaching to the test rather than focusing on engaging and interacting with students, a significant number of schools lack productive opportunities in the classroom. In turn, confident classroom interactions between educators and students in a positive environment promote engagement to an extent, alongside classroom content (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Havik & Westergård, 2020). When students are more engaged, their energy exudes to classmates and teachers, making the entire class more engaging and beneficial to learning (Havik & Westergård, 2020). While high school English educators feel the need to focus heavily on literature, writing, and grammar in the upper grades, some high schoolers still need to learn through engaging strategies and a realm of interest in the content matter. Unfortunately, in many classrooms at the secondary level, students go through their days passively learning and regurgitating what teachers tell them (Mehta & Fine, 2019). Although schools want to do better, and teachers want to inspire, there are many struggles still prominent. Students in many high schools find that they have greater learning experiences in extra-curricular courses and electives instead of their core classes. Educators utilize best practices for teaching students, so with careful collaboration and examination, teachers could bring authentic experiences to their students in all areas. Findings allude to educators needing to make learning exciting and motivating, regardless of the content, in order to fight student boredom and lack of engagement (Dewaele & Li, 2021). For students and teachers to engage with one another fluidly and effectively, collaborative, and developmental opportunities must take place in the classroom (Dutt et al., 2020; Mehta & Fine, 2019).

Comparatively, a prominent dichotomy exists between students and teachers, so teachers must exhaust efforts and resources to engage students (Singh, 2019). Students understand that socialization opportunities allow them to collaborate with peers; however, with changes in school and learning environments throughout the past few years, there have been significant



challenges students face, including academic and social disruptions further contributing to a lack of overall engagement (Moote et al., 2021; Plakhotnik et al., 2021). Not only have these changes affected students, but educators have also experienced a heightened sense of stress and uncertainty (Khlaif et al., 2021). The shifts in educational experiences and the growth of new technology allowed for educators and students to navigate these changes simultaneously, and it opened the door to new learning opportunities and collaboration on a different scale. While many scholars believe that teaching traditions in secondary school content matters should differ and include a variety of teaching methods (Sund & Gericke, 2020; Dutt et al., 2020), a more practical approach to engagement is to embed learning opportunities into different socialization activities to achieve trust and efficacy in the classroom (Moote et al., 2021). Student and teacher engagement comes when learning is meaningful, regardless of the content, but instead because of the experiences allotted (Moote et al. 2021). Teachers understand what, how, and why they chose content or instructional materials; however, to promote critical thinking and further other competencies, it requires learning and teaching to create student agency and motivation to become active learners in and outside of the classroom (Sund & Gericke, 2020).

Directly relating to engagement is student achievement, as school engagement is the foundation to heightened academic success (Chase et al., 2014). Academic success can be defined by student participation, motivation, improvement of grades, and mastery of content. Specifically, teacher support and instructional practices during school influence students' development and achievement (Cornejo-Araya & Kronborg, 2021). Regardless of classroom experience, educators impact students' will to learn, attend class, and perform well. Although there are issues beyond engagement that affect student content mastery, educators are at the front when it comes to creating a positive classroom experience. Research has shown that more gifted

students are often significantly impacted by a supportive, engaging teacher, but not all students are as competent or set up for success before they reach their classrooms. Students must develop self-efficacy, learning strategies, and goals throughout their adolescent years, as these contribute to meaningful learning experiences and greater academic achievement (Chase et al., 2014).

Through students' practicing and instilling of these skills, they will become active and engaged in their own learning. Additionally, teachers' fostering a positive environment and encouraging students will also contribute to the expansion of understanding, academically and socially (Cornejo-Araya & Kronborg, 2021). Another study found that emotional and organizational support from educators positively impacts students' engagement in daily lessons (Pöysä et al., 2019). In students' classroom experience, teachers are significant in developing the overall climate and success within a classroom, starting with building student-teacher relationships.

### ***Educators' Experiences and Expectations***

Educators' experiences within the classroom differ according to grade level and location; however, experiences are often shaped by the curricular expectations, training, and resources made available for educators. While many educators are unprepared to succeed in many circumstances, they wish to promote student learning and motivation (Leite et al., 2018; Towlson et al., 2018). Most educators report teaching in an isolated, mainstream format of teaching standards and curricular objectives. There are more studies completed that recognize the importance of teaching cross-curricular and across disciplines. Educators recognize these changes and expectations but lack support and have heavy curricular demands (Leite et al., 2018; Svensson et al., 2020). To gauge educators' feelings regarding engagement, research, such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys, will be necessary to understand how teachers view engagement and student learning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Bowen, 2009; Corbin & Strauss,

2014). Educators affect student learning outcomes, a significant aspect of what makes schools effective. The relationships between teachers and students affect how educators see their success (Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2007). However, school leadership determines how educators adapt and alter instructional practices to enhance motivation and student achievement. Many engagement and educational practices start from the administrative and school administration, but it directly affects educators' experiences and expectations for their students (Dutt et al., 2020; Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2007).

### ***Funding Educators***

Educators receive varying degrees and certifications in order to achieve pay raises and continue the education that is oftentimes expected by each school district. Further, charter, public, and private school educators earn pay according to experience and personal education, in most cases. In some states, there are high-stakes evaluation systems to incentivize teachers; however, this strategy is currently utilized to gauge teacher effectiveness, make tenure decisions, and make dismissal decisions (Ford et al., 2017). Ultimately, these high-stakes systems do more harm than good for many teachers, as much of the evidence is gathered from student performance, and the validity of the evaluation is questioned. In some districts serving minority students, another issue with pay is that there are more inexperienced teachers and lower pay, to begin with; however, the *combat pay* strategy is used to recruit teachers and offer sign-on bonuses (Adamson et al., 2012). This brings about a deeper issue in the policies and expectations for all teachers, as many districts continue to incentivize inexperienced and undereducated teachers in order to recruit them into the classrooms. Teachers work toward fulfilling the expectations of school districts, but it makes the process more challenging when there are potential discrepancies between classrooms and grade levels.

### *High Stakes Testing*

In a public entity, teachers can receive pay incentives based on student test scores, which has caused testing to become a taxing issue in classrooms. When secondary students are taught to the test, not only are standards not aligning with what they need to know to become successful outside of the classroom, but the demands that are placed on them can be unrealistic.

Additionally, by narrowing the curriculum to include the basis of what is covered on the tests, many students lose the chance to discover their strengths, and narrowing the curriculum restricts them from enjoying activities and creativity that is normally part of the designed curriculum (Au, 2022; Berliner, 2011). Since there have been consistent changes to the curriculum in core classes, high stakes testing places teachers at a disadvantage because of the training and preparation needed prior to lessons. Further, the use of these test outcomes to measure teacher effectiveness and student achievement has negative results for their reliability (Farvis & Hay, 2020). Students are held to high expectations to master standards and achieve a grade when they have potentially fallen short in other areas due to COVID and other changes (Au, 2022).

Ultimately, high-stakes testing is rarely used for teacher and student benefit, but instead, is used to report comparisons among students, schools, and districts. While testing does place students in specific classes and levels based on scores, it also corresponds back to teachers who are held to expectations based on student scores, as well (Au, 2022; Cho & Chan, 2020). Teachers work to teach according to school expectations, but in turn, the outcomes of high stakes testing heavily influence teachers' course loads, the student population in their classrooms, and relationships with colleagues and administration (Cho & Chan, 2020). Although high-stakes testing may open the door for some students to seek success, it may also discourage other students. In order to build educators' feelings of worthiness and personal success, it is necessary to prepare them for

the extremity of high stakes testing to ensure that they are prepared for engaging students and feeling fulfilled throughout their time in the classroom. Accordingly, planning, and professional development for educators are needed to improve educators' experiences and student readiness in all schools (Farvis & Hay, 2020).

### **Development of Agency**

Similarly, students who are learning online or on campus, in many instances, face a lack of engagement; however, teachers are capable of spending time on practice, activities, and goal-driven lessons to allow for student success (Moote et al., 2021; Plakhotnik et al., 2021). Teachers are the agents who are most prominent in reforming educational practices. Students' development of agency and metacognition can be developed by teachers in numerous ways, including modeling strategies, incorporating challenging activities, allowing student voice and choice, and providing students the opportunity to self-evaluate (Karlen et al., 2023; Moote et al., 2021). While educators also must accept and progress toward the constant shifts in education, their experiences and professional goals determine much of the agency levels in high school English classrooms (Bonner et al., 2020). Specifically, teachers' understanding of the content and how to teach it is important in developing skills, beliefs, and motivation in teaching students' efficiency and self-regulation (Karlen et al., 2023). Teachers modeling life-long learning strategies in the classroom shows agency, which directly impacts students' agency in the classroom. According to Vare (2021), the agency is not always evident in student-teacher relations, but in some instances, it can look like a teacher listening to students' opinions. Furthermore, in a study regarding STEM implementation, most of the classroom instructional time was taken up by student-led discussions and activities, rather than teacher-led lectures (Bonner et al., 2020). While this model allows students to become the center of the learning

experience, the model also shows the lack of understanding regarding teacher agency and teacher-led classrooms.

Aspects, such as students' lives outside of school, also impact their amount of agency within the classroom, and this may also stem from their feelings of comfort and safety (Pöysä et al., 2020). Working to understand some of the developmental and age-related issues takes time. However, when adequate resources are provided and discussed, students can set themselves up for success (Plakhotnik et al., 2021). When the agency is taught and expected of students, especially in the high school English classroom, it will allow them to be agents of change once they leave the classroom. Student self-reflection allows for redirection and discussion amongst peers, but the better option in some instances may be to provide students with strengths and weaknesses to encourage and build stronger learners, including clarity (Dutt et al., 2020; Moote et al., 2021). In the classroom, educators may begin the development of agency through goal-setting and scaffolding learning. Also, by allowing students to take ownership of their learning through choice-based literature, various written and project-based opportunities, and meaningful collaboration among peers, they will find comfort and appreciation for the classroom environment and implementing practices. Ultimately, enhancing motivation and agency builds partnerships, which can set students up for success for years to come (Singh, 2019; Moote et al., 2021).

### **Summary**

Secondary classrooms need more engagement to enhance students' learning experiences. The designated curriculum and instructional practices incorporated into core classes, such as high school English, lack applicability, diversity, and student interest. Because curriculum developers wish to incorporate the necessary literature and educational practices to succeed

beyond high school English classes, researchers have determined many factors contributing to student success, including student agency, technological advances and changes, educator and student diversity, and instructional and curricular engagement. Since many factors have altered over the years for these reasons, curriculum and instruction also need to alter in order to best serve students and prepare them to be lifelong learners. Additionally, researchers have investigated Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) to examine the applicability of instruction and classroom environment to encourage engagement and best practices in building student agency, drive, and overall success. Educators serve as powerful agents for improving educational experiences within the classroom; furthermore, using the social cognitive theory to guide the understanding of this topic, the corresponding literature included student ownership and agency, classroom environment and social interactions, and teacher knowledge and experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). However, there needs to be more literature discussing student success and mastery following engagement strategies, curricular changes, and instructional practices. Recent literature alludes to educator instruction and curricular engagement strategies playing a significant role in student agency, positivity, and success. Bridging the gap between high school and college or post-secondary pathways begins in the high school classroom. College and career readiness relies heavily on students' experiences in high school classrooms, and while students have been monitored extensively throughout their elementary school years, high school English classrooms lack research determining best practices through necessary extensive research, surveying, and observations (Braun et al., 2021). By examining student engagement, educator buy-in, and instructional practices, educators and curriculum developers can best understand the direction of secondary English classrooms and the needs of high school students.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

In this qualitative case study, I analyze teachers' perceptions and experiences with student engagement and agency in secondary English classrooms. This approach allowed for data collection through interviews, focus groups, surveys, and questionnaires. High school educators from a variety of schools and states participated in this study. Since there have been significant changes in student engagement and achievement due to various factors, this study allowed teachers to share their experiences and support for employment in their classes to understand the changes that potentially need to be made. Teachers may also lack training in curricular engagement strategies; however, the data collected throughout the process allows themes to develop for analysis. Since there is a need to establish curricular engagement strategies, student achievement and success beyond the classroom depend on the engagement strategies implemented and the reflections necessary to enhance engagement strategies.

Furthermore, a case study approach was appropriate for this research because it leads to an understanding of a complex issue in real life (Creswell, 2007). The research design and rationale are explained, and the research questions presented in this section introduce the participants and site of this study. I continue to explain my role as a researcher and end with a summary to include my professional background and perspective to lead into the study. Once my role had been described, I implement different types of data collection, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys. While I continue to refer to myself in the first person throughout this qualitative study, I also construct and make sense of the data collected and the participants interviewed.



## Research Design

This section includes the method of research, as well as the design and approach that were used in this qualitative study. Qualitative research was used to study a group of participants to discuss and formulate a further understanding of personal classroom experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This approach was utilized to explore the phenomenon using data sources and methods to understand and apply the perceptions and experiences of various educators (Moustakas, 1994). The case study design was used to follow this single case in which teachers from a variety of schools have participated. This intrinsic case study used information according to grade level and students (Creswell, 2007). Further, the case study design was appropriate for this research to best describe the experiences of educators and instructional practices used to engage students in their classrooms. Educators with private, public, and charter school experience took part. Specifically, I aimed to understand how educators plan to engage while collecting insight into their perceptions of students in their classrooms, and this study provided a greater understanding of modern-day high school classroom experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

When beginning research, phenomenological and grounded theory approaches were considered; however, both approaches were not narrow enough to focus on a single entity (Corbin & Strauss, 2014.) The grounded theory approach is based on the development of a new theory because of my study, which was not appropriate for this study. The phenomenological approach would not benefit this study due to the understanding needed from a lived experience in a real-world setting. The case study approach allowed me to gather themes and details from my participants' experiences to form opinions and an understanding of the results.

This research study is qualitative because it uses different sources of data to develop detailed descriptions of this single case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was conducted online where participants recalled experiences with their classes over the years and recognized differences in students when it came to classroom experiences and student engagement. Since I am the key instrument in this qualitative study, I interviewed and surveyed participants and can provide in-depth descriptions of the process. The research provided various collections of data, and by utilizing the qualitative approach, I developed a more detailed, yet varied, understanding of personal classroom experiences. Comparatively, quantitative research was not used due to it focusing on numerical data and statistics, not allowing for detailed descriptions and individual responses.

The case study approach was used to examine themes and issues that arise in high school English classrooms to develop an understanding based on the results. Case study allows for research to identify and expand upon topics, and in this study, teachers' roles were considered accordingly (Yin, 2018). The data that were collected in a variety of ways also promote a greater understanding of classroom structures and teacher experience. As I utilize surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews, results provided an in-depth collection of feedback to support understanding of student engagement shifts, as well as strategies and challenges in classrooms. Specifically, I used an embedded single-case study because of the multiple levels of analysis I complete within a single case (Budiyanto et al., 2019). Because classrooms differ according to educator, it was necessary to use a variety of analyses to support and understand the many experiences of high school English educators. This embedded single-case study allows a vast array of perspectives.

## **Research Questions**

The following questions supported the study of student engagement as participants considered student experience shaping educators' perceptions of engagement in the high school English classroom. The central research question considers teachers' experiences, and the sub-questions support students' behaviors, personal experiences, and classroom environment. Collectively, the goal was for the research questions to support Bandura's social cognitive theory and understand what leads to motivation.

### **Central Research Question**

How do educators support student engagement in the secondary English classroom?

### **Sub-Question One**

How do students' behaviors affect engagement in the secondary English classroom?

### **Sub-Question Two**

How does the classroom environment affect student engagement in the secondary English classroom?

### **Sub-Question Three**

How do curriculum and instruction affect student engagement in the secondary English classroom?

## **Setting and Participants**

The study sites were a variety of high schools in different states. The sites included public, private, and charter schools. The public and charter school educators served diverse populations, and the demographics of schools are provided in a table. Furthermore, public school student populations ranged from 1,500 to 2,000 per school, while private schools hold 200 to 500 students each.

**Site**

The sites for this study include secondary schools with more than 300 students. Public and private educators were included, and educators were contacted about the study before providing consent. The focus groups included new teachers, as well as teachers who have taught over eight years. This provided the study with the data collection needed to establish qualitative research. Secondary English teachers were surveyed and interviewed. Educators served 200 students to over 1,000 students. The variety of school systems allowed data to show discrepancies in size and location, if any, regarding student engagement experiences, behaviors, and achievement. These educators were asked to participate in this project due to the variety of years they have taught, the types of schools they have served, and the courses they have taught. Each educator served different demographics, further determining the significance of student success and the curricular plans involved. All educators worked at schools that had certified administrative teams, according to communications and prior research, consisting of a principal, at least one assistant principal, curriculum coaches, and several certified English teachers. The schools all offer core classes and elective courses for each content. Each school has lead teachers. All core classes, including high school English courses, offer a variety of educational levels, including dual enrollment and advanced placement courses. These schools follow a daily school schedule, and all schools are in-person. Teachers were contacted to participate, and questioning and surveying were approved.

**Participants**

Participants in this study were secondary English teachers from a variety of schools. Educators who teach different content areas provided different viewpoints and concepts in teaching. This study focused on secondary English courses, including journalism and creative

writing-style systems. The goal was to focus on participants and their voices to explore the experiences of the participants. These teachers vary in ethnicity and gender. Also, the teachers surveyed range from first-year teachers to veteran teachers. In order to maximize the effects and reduce the data collection, 9 secondary English educators took place in the study.

### **Recruitment Plan**

Once the approval was completed, I sent out requests to secondary English educators to take part in the study. I began by reaching out to educators through social media and obtaining connections from peers and colleagues. Once I located educators who had served in a variety of schools and had different backgrounds in teaching, I asked for them to participate to provide experiences and strategies utilized to engage students. I collected data from teachers who agreed to participate. Participants were able to review questions before continuing, and they were aware of the process before starting. I collected feedback from 9 educators to properly gauge common perceptions and themes. I utilized teachers from at least five different schools in at least three different states. All interested participants were reminded of all procedures and personal rights, providing consent before proceeding with the data collection and research. Information about the study was provided to faculty members as part of the process of informed consent. Once faculty decided their interest to participate in my study, they were asked to complete the section in the survey for informed consent (Appendix C). After collecting the Google form surveys, a list of participants was developed. I then sent out an email to determine meeting times and days for interviews and focus groups. Upon the collection of survey responses, I created a schedule on the calendar with interviews and sent the Zoom link to all participants.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Since I work in a school as a secondary English educator and have worked in charter, public, and private institutions, I am invested in the outcome of this study. While research is helpful for professors and those at higher institutions, it also benefits high and elementary school educators to understand further problems, implications, and answers to guide their work (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This study helps discover practices to enhance student engagement and achievement. This section continues to review information about my framework for this study, which is significant because I have formulated this research around my beliefs and educational experiences. The nature of education inside and outside of the classroom has changed drastically over the last five years, but, over time, classrooms have lost student engagement due to a variety of factors. Not only have I experienced this shift as a teacher each school year, but I am currently experiencing it online, as a virtual high school English teacher. My experience and reality allow me to use knowledge and values to direct my research process and relate to my participants to obtain their trust, gather their thoughts, and create a plan of action to help educators with the widespread engagement issue.

### **Interpretive Framework**

I utilized post-positivism and pragmatism for the research paradigm. This research paradigm allows data collection and analysis through participant involvement, emphasizing understanding perspectives from multiple dimensions and methods. The multiple dimensions and methods tend to limit personal bias because multiple research methods take place, and the study is viewed from various angles (Panhwar et al., 2017). Also, pragmatism focuses on participants' words and thoughts driving the problem-solving and discussion. Since I value each educator's

perceptions, I collected data in numerous ways to discover problems and pose responses to some of the common themes uncovered throughout the process.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

The three philosophical assumptions I include are ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Ontology focuses on views of reality and existence. Epistemology is the connection of reality to personal knowledge, and how it is recognizable in one's life. Lastly, axiology focuses on values and how the values guide research and positionality. Knowing the following philosophical assumptions provide me with the understanding needed to show my analysis for this qualitative case study.

#### ***Ontological Assumption***

Since ontology helps make sense of lived experiences, I recognize multiple views of reality (Akkerman et al., 2021). While I realize that participants throughout the research process have different beliefs, I focus on reporting and discussing superior experiences, according to my research topic. I believe that, although God is my one truth and explanation of everything, people can have their views and form their interpretation of reality. However, when it comes to focusing on God's children and encompassing a Godly approach to engagement and teaching, I keep my heart grounded in my reality while accepting the views of others. My work with high school students benefits my approach to acceptance of all opinions. Furthermore, the continual societal changes have become prominent, so my system allows me to collect data through interviews, focus groups, and surveys. All participants' experiences are documented and recorded.

#### ***Epistemological Assumption***

Since this is a qualitative study, my connection and knowledge benefit the research as I interviewed and questioned various people regarding their experiences from those in the

classroom daily. I relied on my participants' interviews and the documents to collect data to analyze and further understand the study. The participants' responses were used to develop common themes. Although they were not physically observed, I achieved a personal experience with participants to obtain their perceptions and feelings toward student engagement and achievement within their classrooms.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

I am a teacher, and I am passionate about the educational experience that is offered within the classroom. Although I have seen engaging classrooms and classrooms needing more student engagement, I wanted to ensure that my study covers different learning environments to ensure that themes are adequately developed. Students can reach high achievement levels regardless of their upbringing and other situational differences. Teachers can impact their assigned curriculum depending on how they utilize their classroom time. When I got to the point of analyzing data, I was not biased due to the educator's position. I documented themes and data accurately and without preconceived beliefs.

### **Researcher's Role**

I am very invested in student engagement strategies within classrooms because I have experienced chaos and organization within my classroom on a single day. While I am only familiar with secondary English, I only completed my study from those participants. Although numerous issues are leading to student engagement, I focus on educators as the reporters because they can recognize what occurs within their classrooms firsthand. Since I am currently an employed educator in a secondary English classroom, I remain a neutral researcher who provides a voice to the participants.



My role in this study was to engage my participants and obtain their trust throughout the research process. In selecting participants, I let secondary English educators from a random selection of schools know of my study and the roles I wished them to hold. I initially had a vague site, but the process was virtual. My research and analysis were considered and understood based on my experience. My teaching experience and working with educators new to teaching increased my understanding and acceptance of the conversations I had with participants. Gaining educators' experiences of these interactions improved my ability to be supportive and knowledgeable when engaging high school students and guiding them toward curricular achievement.

### **Procedures**

To begin the process, I sent a request to various secondary English teachers to take part. Next, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University to document findings, ensuring that participants were protected and that results would remain confidential. Finally, I requested consent and shared my study with secondary English educators who expressed interest in taking part.

### **Data Collection Process**

Interested teachers reviewed the research study to recognize the confidentiality aspect and voluntary nature of my study. Once participants stated that they would like to participate, completing consent, they were asked to participate in an interview, which is also kept confidential. The interview questions focused on teachers' perceptions of student engagement and skill-gauging in secondary English classrooms. These interviews lasted 20 to 40 minutes in length, and the interview questions were reviewed and edited accordingly. Upon approval, interview questions were used. The next step included a survey, which was provided to all

educators willing to participate. All were able to complete the survey electronically. Upon collecting all questionnaires and finishing interviews, themes and perceptions were developed and analyzed. Simultaneously, focus groups were formed. Interviews and focus groups allowed for pieces to develop and similar experiences to be used for further research.

### **Permissions**

I obtained permission to research and collect data from numerous high school English educators. The request was sent to individuals to move forward with the data collection. I also included the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process from Liberty University, which was needed for permission.

### **Data Collection Plan**

This research study was completed to interpret and analyze engagement strategies and experiences of secondary English educators in a variety of schools. Data collection started after I obtained approval from the IRB of Liberty University. My data analysis followed a case study framework, while I collected data from multiple sources to establish effectiveness. To proceed, I utilized individual interviews, focus groups, and surveys for my data collection.

### **Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach**

I collected data through interviews with educators from various schools. My questions consisted of open-ended questions to allow educators to provide multiple responses as fitting. Once educators have agreed to participate in the interview process, I provided them Zoom link to join. Then, in the time frame allotted, and after experts in my field have reviewed my questions, I began interviewing each candidate. I carefully noted the date, time, and place of the interview and the candidate while including specific questions in the discussion. The interview process, once completed, was then utilized to analyze the responses, comparing and contrasting, while

ensuring that accurate information has been recorded and collected following specific guidelines and remaining professional.

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

1. How would you describe your teaching background and experience? CRQ
2. Why is engagement necessary in the high school English classroom? CRQ
3. How would you describe the current level of student engagement in your high school English classes? CRQ
4. Describe successful strategies you use when working with students with behavioral issues. SQ1
5. What are some ways you engage students in your classes? CRQ, SQ3
6. How would you describe students' achievement on assessments and primary grades (projects, tests, and essays), on average, in your classes? SQ3
7. Describe successful strategies you use to positively impact your classroom environment. SQ2
8. What strategies do you use to motivate students and promote engagement in your classes? CRQ, SQ3
9. What do you recognize as issues or barriers to achieving engagement? CRQ
10. What is a significant change within your classroom from your first year of teaching until now? CRQ, SQ3
11. How does self-efficacy affect student engagement? SQ2
12. In what ways do you feel that students' factors influence their classroom engagement or interest? SQ1

13. Describe significant change(s) following COVID that you recognize within the classroom. CRQ, SQ1

14. How has technology affected student engagement (for better or for worse)? CRQ, SQ3

15. Describe any additional information about your experience with classroom engagement that would be helpful for me to consider. CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3

Questions one, two, and three are questions that provide information regarding the background of each participant and their experience in education. Questions four through 13 allowed participants to describe their experiences within their classrooms, including observations, challenges, strategies, and changes that have occurred throughout their time as high school English teachers. Questions nine and 10 focus on specific changes and challenges participants have faced in the classroom. Questions 13 and 14 allowed participants to discuss more recent challenges following the pandemic and technological advancements in and outside of the classroom. Finally, question 15 allowed participants to relay any final thoughts that they found necessary to include.

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan***

Interviews allowed for an analysis of materials to compare participants. Connecting categories of information provided by the participants through selective coding allowed for the phenomenon and themes to be developed. Interviews were recorded and transcribed so I could read and listen multiple times for understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Coding allowed a summative theme to be attributed to data (Saldana, 2016). It may be a single theme or a complete paragraph; however, the codes became more detailed throughout the data collection process, linking the data to their meaning. Also, axial coding allowed the data to be reviewed to explain phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used a conditional matrix to help visualize the conditions

and findings to make sense of the participant's responses. The process allowed for the review of the needs and outcomes of the data analysis. Themes related to the interviews and the meanings were coded multiple times (Bowen, 2009).

### **Focus Groups Data Collection Approach**

Following interviews, I organized focus groups to continue the research to gauge the best teachers' views of classroom engagement and students' self-efficacy. Focus groups occurred online via Zoom with five people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus group was divided into two groups, and meetings were held online. While it was challenging to get a time when all participants could meet, participants were divided into groups according to teaching experience and then were questioned accordingly. Focus groups allowed for educators' voices to be heard and differences to be communicated as personal experiences regarding student engagement were shared. Also, themes were gathered from a group of people more readily than from individual interviews. The focus groups occurred following surveys lasted 30 to 40 minutes. I voice-recorded the focus group meetings so that all participants felt comfortable answering questions. Focus group questions concentrated on how educators think about engagement, how engagement has altered since the first year of teaching, how engagement affects student behavior, the environment, and other personal factors within the classroom, and how engagement can be enhanced to meet the needs of all learners.

### ***Focus Group Questions***

1. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position. CRQ
2. Describe successful engagement practices you have utilized in your classroom. CRQ
3. How has the focus on building student engagement changed the way you teach? CRQ

4. How have student behaviors affected engagement in your classroom? SQ1
5. What are some challenges with engagement in high school English classes? CRQ
6. How do curriculum and instruction affect student engagement? SQ3
7. How does student engagement affect the entire classroom environment? SQ2
8. How is student engagement affected by personal factors? SQ1
9. What is an instructional practice that engages most students? SQ3
10. How can engagement be enhanced to meet the needs of more learners? CRQ

Questions one, two, and three allowed the participants to share their professional background, experiences, and strategies that they have used in their classrooms, allowing for connections to be made between the researcher and participants. Questions four and eight dealt with student behavior and personal factors within the classroom and participants' experience with different learners. Questions nine and 10 allowed for participants to share experiences with engagement strategies and views on engagement in the high school English classroom. This allowed for participants to share their stance on current engagement strategies and how they hope to enhance student engagement.

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan***

While interviews were more specific and require more time, focus groups allowed themes and conversations to develop and gain more content in a shorter time. It was not challenging to get participants to vocalize their experiences. Still, they were encouraged to safely share, acknowledging the confidentiality of the IRB and the professionalism of the entire research plan (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus groups repeated some of the common themes to develop a more thorough understanding of how individual teachers deal with engagement. Upon completing the collection of data, it was analyzed by first identifying main ideas and trends discussed. Since

demographics differed according to participants, outcomes also varied; however, comparison analysis took place frequently throughout the review of data. By comparing findings through audio and transcriptions, themes and subthemes remained consistent (Greenwood et al., 2017).

### **Survey Data Collection Approach**

I utilized surveys to collect specific feedback from educators. The goal of incorporating surveys was to gather detailed feedback on questions. While some questions were more precise, there was also space for questions to be answered honestly and personally based on personal experiences. Also, these surveys were sent to people who have decided to take part and have signed consent digitally, as data suggests, a potentially more substantial number of volunteers (Braun et al., 2021). Many educators' different narratives and positionings encouraged rich feedback through surveying with open-ended questions. While it is also argued that surveys are too rigid and do not allow follow-up questions as efficiently as interviews allow, I hoped that participants wish to share more via writing or feel more comfortable answering questions digitally than on record. I understood that what was not collected using one approach would be collected utilizing another, especially with various personalities in participants.

### ***Survey Questions***

1. How do personal factors affect student engagement?
2. How do behavior factors affect student engagement?
3. How do environmental factors affect student engagement?
4. How would you describe the role of engagement in classroom learning environments?
5. How do you think engagement in classrooms impacts student achievement?
6. How have student needs affected your lesson planning or teaching style?
7. What is a strategy that you feel helps build an engaging classroom community?

8. How would you describe engagement in the high school classroom?
9. How do you think engagement could be enhanced to benefit the needs of more learners?
10. What suggestions would you like to share to help other teachers support engagement and student success in the classroom?
11. Think about the students in your classroom. Is there a link between the higher-achieving students and their engagement within your classroom?
12. If some students are higher achieving regardless of engagement, what factors contribute to their success?
13. Lastly, how do you feel that your teaching experience has prepared you for making engaging curricular decisions?

The first and second questions allowed educators to broadly describe the significance of classroom engagement and form connections between engagement and student achievement. Questions three and four focused on personal experiences in building an engaging classroom community. Question five asked for participants to discuss meetings in the classroom. Questions six and seven allowed feedback from personal experiences and for other educators to develop connections and themes. Questions eight and nine let participants consider specific students and analyze their achievement and engagement. Lastly, question 10 concerned personal experience and skills that have been developed or need more experience.

### ***Survey Data Analysis Plan***

Continuously comparing data, the survey data analysis plan brought the study full circle, as specific questions were compared and reviewed for further understanding. Surveying participants allowed for subsections to be reviewed individually, such as sections reviewing instructor-perceived student engagement, student agency, and student achievement. I began by



looking at the survey questions and determining the size of my group. I compared the data by gathering notes, documents, and reviewing specific questions across the participants. Once determined, I created codes and combined themes in order to develop a cohesive collection of results.

### **Data Synthesis**

The process of synthesizing data occurred through collecting data in the form of interviews, focus groups, surveys, and questionnaires. Data synthesis combined different things to form a holistic approach to qualitative data analysis (Saldaña, 2016). Upon analyzing the data collected, I synthesized the data by recognizing themes and answering research questions. Coding methods allowed different angles to be considered to lead to inquiry. The developing themes guided the categorization of interview responses and surveys. Some articles that developed include curriculum consistency, student assessments, and consistent instructional methods. The result upon completion is a comprehensive understanding of curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments. I utilized Qualitative Data Analysis Software to record and review data for analysis.

### **Trustworthiness**

It was essential to have trust to establish significant findings and provide valid information throughout the collection and analysis process (McGloin, 2008). Rigor, relevance, and trustworthiness are necessary components of a qualitative study. The placement of data, analysis of data, and synthesis of findings were included in the timeline of the research process. Since establishing trustworthiness is significant in a qualitative study, paying attention to all necessary steps throughout the data collection and analysis process was essential. The criteria for establishing trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

## **Credibility**

I ensured that participants felt heard and understood through the interviewing and questioning. I provided documents for participants needing text in front of them and repeat questions in the interview multiple times. Once completed, I ran the data through a Qualitative Data Analysis System to properly code the collected materials according to the theme. The participants checked over my findings to establish that the information was correct and accurate. I made any changes to develop accurate data before participants and colleagues in the doctoral community check for credibility. This peer debriefing explored other possible feedback during the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once the findings have been reviewed multiple times, the data was approved. To establish that the process was set to run smoothly, the structure of procedures was essential to maintain credibility. Seeming that more sources were used effectively than individual sources, I completely understood participants through surveys, interviews, and collected documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

## **Transferability**

While I could not assure transferability, I aimed to find connections to readers. Transferability is the idea that findings may be applicable in other circumstances (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data was placed into categories upon collection for participants to review. This data may be applied to theories, the collection of artifacts, and multiple participants. Peer debriefing, allowing peers not invested in the study to establish an understanding and experience the data, enabled data to be viewed differently. Also, triangulation allowed for different data sources throughout the study. Furthermore, persistent observation allowed for consistent engagement with the participants to apply data to similar or other contexts.

## **Dependability**

While dependability shows that findings must be consistent with being utilized and replicated, I kept accurate recordings and extensive notes, reviewing data upon collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Also, peer debriefing allowed for reviewing other professionals not invested in the study to ensure no bias or alterations to the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data and relevant material were conveyed purposefully. Upon review, the goal was for the study to be repeated due to its effectiveness. A thorough examination by a committee is to be taking place through an inquiry audit.

## **Confirmability**

Data was collected directly from questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. In this way, there was not researcher bias due to the findings coming from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since triangulation was utilized, results need to be replicated when using research methods, further maintaining trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, others in the doctoral community and educator colleagues reviewed materials to gauge findings and allow for the examination of collected data.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Once approved, I asked participants to partake in the study. Participants were provided consent forms before I began the data collection and were notified of their rights and roles in research participation. The participants were be made aware of the voluntary study they were being asked to participate in and their rights throughout the process. Once signed and returned, participants were recognized and provided with security to protect their privacy. Everything recorded and documents collected are kept on my computer for three years; however, if I decided that this study needs an extension throughout the process, the data would not be destroyed, and

the participants would know of this decision. The computer uses a password which only I can access. If necessary, participants would participate in multiple meetings to discuss any implications and time constraints, ensure their responses are accurate, and provide any updates to the study. Potential risks and benefits were addressed before moving forward. Upon completion, I thanked them and ensured that they remained up to date throughout the continuing process.

### **Summary**

This qualitative case study recognized secondary English educators' engagement strategies and the success and achievement of their students to support both groups' experiences in the classroom. This study utilized surveys, individual interviews, and focus groups. While interview questions and questionnaire materials focused on teachers' perceptions and experiences, the focus groups thoroughly detailed questions provided to participants. Upon the data collection completion, I utilized methods of identifying themes and coding data accordingly. Through this study, I gathered feedback to further understand teachers' perceptions of student engagement and achievement within their classrooms to collectively recognize common issues and options to serve the learning community best.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this case study is to explore how high school English educators understand and experience student engagement throughout their careers in the classroom. The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of my data analysis. In this chapter, participant descriptions are presented, and themes are generated using MAXQDA coding software. This chapter includes responses to research questions, anonymous survey responses, and interview responses. The chapter concludes with a summary of the results.

### **Participants**

While the desired sample for this study was placed at 7 to 10 participants, the sample size was met with 9 participants who agreed to participate in my study. The demographics of the individuals who agreed to participate in my study were 7 females and 2 males. The male participants had a variety of educational experience serving in public schools and holding leadership roles within schools. The female participants had experience in private, public, and charter schools. Most of the female participants had experience at numerous schools and had taught introductory courses, as well as advanced placement courses. Schools in which participants taught ranged from 250 students enrolled to 2,000 students enrolled in grades nine through twelve. Participants ranged from 21 years old to 60 years old, with 1 year to 30 years of high school English teaching experience. Table 1 provides a view of participants' years in education, content area, courses taught, and types of schools taught.

Table 1

*Teacher Participants*

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Content Area	Courses Taught	Types of Schools Taught
Jamie	31	English	English 11 and 12, Speech, Theatre, Public Speaking	Public and Private
Piper	22	English	English 9-12, American and British Literature, 10 <sup>th</sup> grade English, and AP Courses	Public and Private
Corie	1	English	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade English	Private
Nora	8	English	9 <sup>th</sup> and 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade English, Film Studies, Public Speaking, English Composition	Public, Private, and Charter
Olivia	7	English	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade English	Public
Tucker	10	English	10 <sup>th</sup> and 11 <sup>th</sup> Grade English	Public
Cody	10	English	9 <sup>th</sup> and 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade English	Public
Logan	13	English	9 <sup>th</sup> and 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade English, AP Seminar and Research	Public and Charter
Megan	10+	English	9 <sup>th</sup> , 10 <sup>th</sup> , and 11 <sup>th</sup> Grade English	Public, Private, and Abroad

**Jamie**

Jamie was a white female who was in her 60's. She had over 30 years of experience in the high school English classroom teaching numerous English, speech, and theatre classes. She served over 27 years at public schools and spent some time after that in private schools.

**Piper**

Piper was a white female who was in her late 50's. She had 22 years of teaching experience in the high school English classroom in public and private schools. She taught all grades and elective courses within each grade level.

**Corie**

Corie was a white female who was in her early 20's. She was finishing her first year of teaching high school English in a private school. Corie had field experience in the public sector as well. At the time of this study, she was teaching on-level 9<sup>th</sup> grade English.

**Nora**

Nora was a white female who was in her early 30's. She had 8 years of experience teaching high school English classes, as well as electives at the high school and dual enrollment level. She taught in public schools, charter, and was teaching in a private school at the time of this study.

**Olivia**

Olivia was a white female who was in her late 30's. She taught for 7 years in public schools and had experience in tutoring and online learning, as well as middle school teaching prior to becoming a high school teacher.

**Tucker**

Tucker was a Hispanic male who was in his early 30's. Tucker had 10 years of teaching experience in public schools. Tucker had a special education background and had been in the English classroom his entire career.

**Cody**

Cody was a white male who was in his early 30's. Cody had 10 years of teaching experience in public schools and got started through Teach for America. Cody left education after the year 2023 for the time being.

**Logan**

Logan was a white female in her mid-30s. Logan taught for 7 years at public schools before leaving for a brief time, and then returned to charter for a year, and went back to public schools where had been since then. Logan began teaching lower level and on-level courses, and teaches AP courses at the time of this study.

**Megan**

Megan was a white female in her early 30's. Megan taught out of the country while finishing her degree, and then continued to teach when returning to the United States. Megan had been teaching for over 10 years in public and private schools.

**Results**

The results of this study are presented in the form of a narrative. The descriptions of the themes and subthemes that were generated during the process of data analysis are presented. Quotes from participants were collected through the focus group, interview, and surveying processes, and they are presented in this chapter. To develop themes and subthemes, the quotes serve as support to thoroughly understand participants' experiences. The central research questions and sub-questions are then provided. The themes and sub-themes apply to the central research question and sub-questions. The themes are classroom environment, student engagement, student voice and choice, and teacher responsibilities. The subthemes are student



participation and achievement, lowering of standards, personalizing the curriculum, use of technology, revamping the curriculum, recognizing student setbacks, and changes after COVID.

### **Classroom Environment**

The classroom environment theme is created from data collected during anonymous surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The participants feel that a classroom environment can make or break the engagement of students and their overall perception of school. The participants strive to provide a safe, positive learning experience to their students. Question three on the anonymous survey asks the participants how environmental factors affect student engagement. One participant included that “students can feel distracted by their mobile phone, hot or cold temperature, other students making loud noises, and the general atmosphere of the classroom.” Another participant included that a “classroom environment should be safe and inclusive or it will negatively affect student engagement.” Overall, a participant shared that they felt like “the environment includes the room itself and the functionality of the community formed within its walls.”

The interviews also support the classroom environment theme. While interviewing Jamie, she discussed how there was so much responsibility in a large room filled with students and how each student plays a role in the creation of a positive environment. Piper included that she felt a considerable amount of her time joking and getting to know students personally so that they knew she was invested in them and their learning. She ensured that she knew the name of each student on the first day of school. My interview with Corie also supported the classroom environment theme, as she said the relationships she builds and time she takes to get to know her students was enough to get buy-in for lecture and other lessons that are overall not as exciting.

### *Student Participation and Achievement*

Question six on the anonymous surveys alluded to the sub-theme of student participation and achievement within the classroom. The question asks the participants to describe the role of engagement in classroom learning environments. One participant included that “student needs and classroom environment are always on [participant’s] mind. I like to lead with relationships and let the planning build out from the students and their learning styles.” This participant also provided that students need to have buy-in to want to participate, stating that he “recognizes students growth more steadily when they are involved in learning.” Another participant stated, “The classroom environment should feature contributions from the students themselves, so they may feel some investment in the place in which they learn.” A third participant included that “students who take part in class generally do better in my class.” Classroom environments promote a student’s safety and well-being, and when teachers provide clear expectations to set the tone of the classroom environment, the instructional practices and meeting students’ needs can build from there.

Question number seven in the interviews asked participants to describe successful strategies they use to positively impact their classroom environments. Nora had been in the classroom for eight years, and she still believed that energy in the classroom can be used to build engagement and uplift the class as a whole. Nora’s response to question seven was “start by getting them to write to get them invested, and then get stakeholders involved to lead to a podcast, video, or something that builds.” Tucker responded to question seven similarly by stating, “I try to take the essential question of a unit and explicitly tie in to kids’ lives. You must get buy in immediately and use the momentum from there.” Corie stated, “my students who take part in class every day have the highest grades in my class.” Teachers need to have relationships

with students to foster participation, and often students will want to work for teachers who clearly show that they are taking time to get to know students. Many factors can influence student achievement, but teachers have some ability to influence much of the student population in their classrooms.

### ***Lowering of Standards***

The lowering of standards sub-theme contributes to classroom environment. Question number twelve on the anonymous survey was a query for participants to detail what factors contribute to student success. One participant stated that “most students can do just fine in any classes without much engagement.” Another respondent included, “Students are used to getting by without engagement for so long that it is just a routine.” A third respondent stated that “most students enter high school below grade level but somehow make it through to graduate.” In personal interviews, Cody provided his thoughts stating, “High graduation rates means lowering of standards to have the gains of what makes up a school system. Disengagement increased because we didn’t change with the times.” It is concerning that some students get by with passing class regardless of feeling like they did or did not get anything out of the course. If graduation is the end goal, then students must be engaged in their learning throughout the process, or they will not know where they are going to go upon leaving high school. The theme of a classroom environment relates to the lowering of standards because it is a teacher’s efforts to keep standards high regardless of what is going on around them.

Focus group question number five asked the participants to list some challenges with engagement in the high school English classroom. The question alludes to challenges with student participation, overall classroom environment, curriculum, and instruction. I received a variety of responses from participants, but all participants included thoughts regarding the use of

cell phones, the expectations of the schools following COVID, and the changes of student apathy and interests. The conclusion is that educators find these items to be halting student improvement in behavior, academics, and engagement, overall causing a wider gap in achievement since prior to COVID.

### **Student Engagement**

The anonymous survey responses for question eight varied depending on course and classroom, but they still provided the need for a push toward personalizing curriculum and utilizing technology effectively when used. Question eight asked participants to describe engagement in the high school English classroom. The first participant stated, “It varies depending on subject and if the students are able to take responsibility and ownership of their learning.” A second participant wrote, “Engagement looks like group work sometimes and individual work sometimes, but great discussion or focused work.” Many participants’ responses alluded to the idea that students should be able to have some say in their learning experiences. Because of the shifts in education and the school expectations, students would feel more invested in their education and classroom experience if this mindset was adopted by educators. The term *variety* was utilized many times in survey responses, alluding to the opportunities made available to students and how variety strengthens engagement.

Interview question five asked participants about ways they engage students in their classes. Regarding strategies she used, Olivia stated, “Movement is necessary. Get the kids up for scavenger hunts and activities that do not include the Chromebook.” Logan similarly included that “overplanning lessons, getting students up and moving, and changing up the pace of class everyday helps.” A newer teacher, Corie, stated, “I try to get them invested in activity especially if the novel isn’t interesting.” Participants used their strategies and what they felt were

best practices to engage students; however, newer teachers could lack knowledge and need strategies for their toolbox when it comes to engaging students.

### ***Personalizing the Curriculum***

Individual interview question number three asked participants to describe the current level of student engagement in their classrooms. Cody stated that “some students are engaged most of the time because they’re higher achieving students.” Olivia also included that she had students who did not want to be at school at all. Corie stated, “Forty percent of students are just in the room. They come in and get on their computers or phones the moment they come into class.” When asked if these factors were fixable, most participants said in all likelihood, but it would come down to involving students’ interests in the classroom. The concern is that the trend of lack of engagement and lowering of standards will continue if the curriculum is not altered to meet the needs of secondary students.

Interview question number nine asked participants what they recognize as issues of barriers to achieving engagement, in which many stated that the students were not involved in their learning. Olivia stated, “If students are not interested it is going to be extremely hard and no content will get covered. English departments need to combine efforts and really set the curriculum geared toward their interests.” Nora included, “We have to realize no one will be English majors these days. I think that has really changed because we are unable to engage students by telling them they must enjoy reading and writing.” All participants brought ideas to incorporate into the English classroom, as well as shared some strategies that they have attempted to gain student interest. Since there is a lack of interest in the subject matter, there needs to be a shift in meeting the interests of more students or turn to make some English courses more geared toward skill practices rather than novel units.

In the anonymous survey, in question nine, participants were asked how they thought engagement could be enhanced to benefit the needs of more learners. One participant stated, “Take the time to include activities, games, and collaborate with other educators who are just as passionate about meeting students’ needs.” Another participant noted, “This survey is a perfect example that engagement looks different to everyone. Identify what engagement looks like to your students first.” Most participants alluded to the issue that educators need training in order to engage effectively, and another participant included, “Teachers need to learn how to set up a purposeful environment and administrators need to support staff when there are distractors in the room.” For educators to have resources to practice, collaborate, and discover trends would be beneficial so that they felt better prepared each school year. There is not one engaging approach that works best for all students, but it is that much more important to enhance engagement and staff support with urgency.

### ***Use of Technology***

Interview question fourteen alluded to student engagement in the sense that technology helps and hinders student engagement, according to participants’ responses. Participants are asked how technology has affected student engagement for better and for worse. Eight out of nine participants stated that technology was a hindrance to conducive learning and engagement in their classrooms. Piper stated, “They’re addicted to technology for social media, for cheating, for Chat GTP. How do you get their attention back and prepare them?” Logan added, “The biggest challenge for me is cell phones and students’ lack of engagement because they’re so distracted by them.” The absence of phones would improve student attention, efforts, engagement, and mastery of content because their focus would be present during class time.

Without the technology, they would be required to think and speak for themselves, and the classroom would be their stage to do so.

Anonymous survey question six asked participants how students' needs have changed their lesson planning and teaching style. This relates to the theme of student engagement because, as it is crucial to recognize students' levels of achievement, it may also be necessary to recognize how to go about engaging students through the process. One participant stated, "I use data to guide my instruction." Additionally, another participant added, "I've adopted the mantra that I can't work harder than the students, especially if they're sidetracked by technology." In a sense, teachers feel the influx of responsibilities while technology is meant to serve as an opportunity to make data collections, communications, and organization more fluid. In turn, it is causing teachers to feel overwhelmed.

Focus group question number nine asked participants about instructional practices that engage the most students, and over half of participants recognized that their best practices are technology-free. Megan stated, "From what I have noticed and tried though is that students enjoy more and learn better by hand and during games and activities outside of the computer." Technology has been used as a crutch for learners in many instances, but by removing the distraction, students are able to practice socialization skills while still being fully present in their learning experience.

### **Student Voice and Choice**

The theme student voice and choice came from the many responses regarding curricular decisions and creating engagement within the classroom. Interview question eight questions participants regarding motivating students and promoting engagement. Tucker stated, "I try to give them as many options to show mastery as possible, which isn't always possible of course,

but it's a nice confidence-boost for them." Cody added that he "leans heavily on surveying to see what and how they wanted to learn." When asked if they focused on standards, all educators alluded to following standards in lesson planning; however, many participants noted that they spent an inordinate amount of time revamping the curriculum to provide students with options. There is a lack of student voice and choice in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English courses due to state testing mandates and state standards, but more teachers have taken chances in allowing students some freedoms. These freedoms not only build relationships between teachers and students, but they also increase students' engagement.

Focus group question six asked participants how curriculum and instruction affect student engagement in their classrooms. Jamie stated, "You can't just let them snooze and you can't, as a teacher, not bring them something to learn that makes them a little excited." Instructional practices differ by participant, but throughout questioning, participants brought up altering instructional practices throughout a class period to develop the curriculum from where it started. Cody shared, "I took the chance to have fun with my students and ignore the fact that I was teaching them *Macbeth*, and I made my instruction theme-driven and it changed everything." Educators who have tried different activities and going beyond the provided curriculum have found success; no participants shared that it has not benefitted their students' engagement.

### ***Revamping the Curriculum***

Interview question fifteen asked participants to describe additional information about their experiences with classroom engagement that would be helpful to consider. Logan stated, "One thing I learned quickly was to chunk material and backward plan to always have goals and projects involved throughout the weeks." Similarly, Megan included, "If you aren't excited about the lesson as a teacher, how would students be excited about it? A big push in English



classrooms is choice and allowing students to read what they want.” While not all participants agreed that students should have freedom in all that they take part in during class, three participants shared that students should have options, such as choice boards and novel freedom in the English classroom at some point in the school year in order to keep their interest. In doing so, teachers may find that they will have less preparation and lecture and could act as facilitators aiding student learning.

Survey question ten asked participants to share suggestions to help other teachers support engagement and student success in the classroom. Most participants shared advice to educators regarding technology use, as well as meeting learners where they are and creating lessons that apply to learners. One participant shared to “get training in cooperative learning and ban social devices in the classroom.” Another participant stated, “Building engagement in the classroom is a way to be proactive and will lessen the opportunities for reactionary practices such as failures and referrals.” All participants alluded to opportunities to promote student engagement and achievement. Technology was a major issue, but to bring a fresh version of curriculum to students could negate major issues within the classroom.

### **Teacher Responsibilities**

The theme of teacher responsibilities was linked to getting to know each individual student and his or her needs, as well as being accepting of the multitude of changes that have occurred since COVID. While engagement falls on student and parent alike, teachers are expected to promote engaging and positive learning while students are present in the classroom. Interview question number seven asked participants to describe successful strategies used to positively impact the classroom environment. Nora, Tucker, and Piper all stated that building relationships with students is the first step to achieving a positive classroom environment. Tucker

added to “get students involved and moving,” and Cody included, “forward minded teachers must try new things and that’s where opportunities flourish.” Expectations fall on teachers, and many teachers accept the responsibility to do all in their power to help students succeed. As proven through my interviews, teacher responsibilities have increased over the last five years, specifically following COVID.

Interview question number six asked participants about students’ achievement, on average, in their classrooms. Although educators may all put different amounts of pressure on grades and administrative rules may apply for different schools, all teachers recognized that students’ engagement was directly related to levels of student achievement. If students were not engaged, their grades were not as high. Cody stated, “I wanted students’ grades in my class to match their efforts and their EOC scores.” Megan added that “achievement for my students depends on class and if students have to have my class or if they’re in it because they chose to be [electives].” Achievement should relate to test scores, but I asked this question to see if participants felt like disengagement and achievement levels were both low. Ultimately, participants shared that they had a mixture, but that engagement was directly related to higher achievement. If engagement were to improve in high school English courses, the goal is that end-of-the-year examinations in English would improve as well.

Anonymous survey question thirteen asked participants how they felt that their teaching experience has prepared them for making curricular decisions. Many participants alluded to the multitude of decisions and daily challenges that occur. One participant stated, “I’ve had to find out what works and what doesn’t work for my students through trial and error.” Another participant shared, “Teaching inclusion and lower-level courses my first nine years prepared me to put extra thought into my lessons so that students would be more willingly engaged in my

class.” Experience of a teacher helps build resources, but it would be beneficial for educators to use such lessons to help new educators and educators coming in from a different career. This could also improve teacher retention.

### ***Recognizing Student Setbacks***

In the focus group questions, number eight asked participants how students’ personal factors affect engagement. Logan stated, “Some students are tardy or miss classes a lot, which leads to their disengagement and overall lack of consistency when it comes to their learning.” Tucker added, “Students lack confidence and motivation, and that could be for a variety of reasons usually outside of teachers’ control.” Students come to school from all areas and having experienced potentially many hardships; however, the disengagement and lack of consistency could be used to improve units so that students could not fall behind to such an extreme and pick up on material with ease.

Interview question twelve asked participants how students’ personal factors influence their classroom engagement and interest. Jamie stated, “Ninety percent or more of kids are influenced by their personal factors. If kids are disciplined, they get through it because they have to for the credit.” Teachers may not have the opportunity to teach different levels of English courses. Cody included that “the most engaging things I did took so much time and I lost pieces of myself doing that for the kids I knew needed more from me.” Many participants recognized the challenges present in many students’ lives outside of school. Although educators cannot help improve students’ lives outside of school, the time within the classroom can be used to benefit students’ experiences and understanding of the world around them.

### ***Changes After Covid***

Interview question number thirteen asked participants to describe significant changes following COVID that they recognized within the classroom. Similarly, participants were asked what significant changes within their classrooms occurred from their first year of teaching until their current year. Corie stated, “I was still in college during COVID so I wouldn’t know what it was like teaching before COVID.” In contrast, Olivia and Nora both mentioned the lack of interaction due to going online. Olivia shared, “They missed face-to-face interaction with their teachers and their peers.” Megan expanded upon the social setbacks and included, “COVID killed the momentum of students’ learning and motivation seems to remain very low, not to mention the level at which some students are behind.” All participants stated that COVID had shifted one or more of the following: the usage of technology, student motivation, parents’ expectations, and instructional practices.

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

There was one study participant who had more experience teaching AP courses and college-level research than on-level and elective courses like the other participants. This participant provided input regarding engagement, but it was different from the experiences of all other participants who had experience in below-level and on-level courses. The participant included engaging strategies at a higher academic level that may not work for other teachers because of student demographics. The strategies this participant mentioned, including student-choice grouping and rigor in research opportunities, were different than other teachers mentioned when they discussed strategies used in the classroom.

Another outlier is that one of my participants found technology beneficial and not an issue in the classroom. If anything, this participant found technology to improve student efforts

and communication. This participant did not mention technology affecting engagement for the worse, as did all other participants.

### ***Outlier Finding #1***

The participant who had experience teaching AP courses and college-readiness courses engaged students effectively without the means of over-preparation, technology, and getting students up and active in their learning. This participant stated, “Students appear engaged when I lecture and their grades alone are motivating.” While this participant included engaging strategies utilized in classes to engage students, it was vastly different from the strategies provided by other participants. This participant also alluded to being more of a lecture- and essay-based class instead of a student-led class with activity-based learning, which would differ from other participants’ experiences.

### ***Outlier Finding #2***

During the survey and interview processes, one participant revealed no issues with technology use in the classroom. I utilized this participant in the study because the participant included strategies and engaging opportunities through the use of technology. Participant stated, “Cell phones are not an issue within my classroom because I use phone pockets and students do not have access to their phones while they are in my class.” The participant has over ten years of experience in the classroom and chooses not to deal with the increasing need to be connected to phones. I found that this participant’s instructional strategies focus around movement in the classroom and hands-on projects and activities.

## **Research Question Responses**

Research questions, found in chapter one, provide guidance for surveys, focus groups, and interviews. The research questions consist of a central research question, as well as three sub

questions. This section includes themes that were previously noted to answer the research question and sub questions. Participants' responses are used to support the answers to the research question and sub questions.

### **Central Research Question**

How do educators support student engagement in the secondary English classroom? The participants described their experience with student engagement in their classrooms to vary depending on class, student factors, and instructional and curricular plans. Cody and Tucker discussed earlier the connections and student buy-in necessary when teaching key concepts. Nora described her successful experiences with student engagement as “for me engagement is focused on trying to keep things relevant and also things paced well.” Nora had taught a variety of high school English courses and discussed how she altered her methods accordingly, but also learned from experience.

Anonymous survey number four asked the participants how they would describe the role of engagement in classroom learning environments. Most participants provided that classrooms need engagement to run properly. One participant responded by stating, “Without engagement there is no classroom learning environment. Without relationship building there is no engaging.” Engagement is mentioned to drive results and rigor which further impacts students' ability to meet success in and outside of school. Another participant stated, “The classroom environment should feature contributions from the students themselves. An educator must allow this if they want to see students engaged regularly.”

### **Sub-Question One**

How do students' behaviors affect engagement in the secondary English classroom? The themes that were previously included show the significance of factors that affect student

engagement and teacher preparedness when determining what and how to best meet the needs of all learners. In response to interview question four regarding engaging students with behavioral issues, Jamie stated that “students should have a say regardless.” Logan included, “Students use phone holders in my classroom and I always switch up seating arrangements; however, I always have a routine so kids know what to expect.”

When responding to survey question number two, many participants mentioned that behavior plays a major role in engagement and can affect the entire classroom. One participant stated, “Behavior is an expression of need. Whether students exhibited positive or negative behaviors, there was a greater need which was a catalyst for those behaviors.” Another participant responded by stating, “Positive and negative behaviors can be determining factors in the level of success achieved.”

Focus group question four asked participants to share how student behaviors have affected engagement. Cody responded, “It fuels others negatively and impacts student learning.” Nora included, “Some behaviors can suck the air out of the room.” Most participants included that behaviors negatively affect the classroom environment, but a few participants included that positive behaviors can help the experience for all involved.

### **Sub-Question Two**

How does the classroom environment affect student engagement in the secondary English classroom? Interview question number seven addresses this question, and participants alluded to strategies used to positively impact their overall classroom environment. Jamie stated, “Choice and designing units thinking about what I would have liked as a student. If I’m not on fire about this, why am I teaching it?” On the other hand, Piper shared, “Classroom management is a big factor. If you can manage your classroom, that’s the first step to achieving a solid environment.”

Participants' responses varied from strategy use to the role of classroom environment in student engagement.

In the surveys, question three asked how environmental factors affect student engagement. One participant included, "We are responsible for creating an environment where students can motivate themselves to learn. We cannot directly motivate them, but we can create an environment conducive for them to do so." Another participant added, "Your classroom environment should be safe and inclusive or it will negatively affect student engagement." All participants noted that environmental factors affect engagement.

### **Sub-Question Three**

How do curriculum and instruction affect student engagement in the secondary English classroom? Question number six from the focus group questions asked participants how curriculum and instruction affect student engagement. Responses from participants refer to the lack of engagement within the curriculum itself and the significance of instructional practices to build engagement and interest in the classroom. Corie alluded to the challenges when students have gaps in their learning due to a multitude of reasons when she stated, "Students will be writing an essay and just clicking to different tabs for games or shopping." Piper and Cody mentioned the achievement gap coming back to the classroom after COVID, and how much of the curriculum remains unchanged, even though students are different than they were even five years ago.

Students differ in terms of interest and background. Survey question twelve asked participants what factors contribute to higher achieving students' success. One participant noted, "The course is usually necessary for students' overall grades, but every once in a while, a student is interested in reading or writing." Another participant stated, "Students especially struggle in



English because they have learned to dislike reading, writing, and anything else that makes them think to an extent.” Overall, participants responded with challenges in curriculum, time to prepare lesson plans, and propose ideas to engage students.

### **Summary**

This study explored the role of engagement in the high school English classroom and how behaviors, environment, and curricular and instructional practices affect student engagement. Participants identified strategies and challenges regarding student engagement in their classrooms. The findings illuminate the importance of support from schools and educators, as well as the opportunity for curricular freedoms and structure within the classroom, to establish positive learning experiences for high school students.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand how educators support student engagement and agency in secondary English classrooms so that factors leading to disengagement are recognized in order to enhance educational experiences within schools. This chapter provides an analysis of my findings, as well as subsections that present the possibilities for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and my recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

The themes that were developed during data analysis provided greater insight to my study, allowing me to generate further interpretations of my findings. Considering the central research question, “How do educators support student engagement in the secondary English classroom,” I was able to establish findings based on a variety of educators’ experiences and insight. The gap in understanding regarding alterations in curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of students was discussed and themes were developed in order to share effective strategies for educators to have a base curriculum and a variety of instructional tools. The research was completed virtually, with a variety of educators from numerous states. This section presents thematic findings after analysis and synthesis. Further, my interpretations of theme development, policy and practice implications, and theoretical and empirical considerations are provided. My study concludes with a section outlining the study’s limitations and offering recommendations for future research.

## **Interpretation of Findings**

There are four thematic findings discussed in this section. Each of the themes have two sub-themes. The themes include in vivo quotes collected from participants during surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

### ***Summary of Thematic Findings***

The four thematic findings include the following: The participants' teaching has shifted according to student needs and interests, expectations for teachers have changed over the last five years, the classroom environment is the most important piece to achieving student engagement, and technology has been the biggest issue in achieving student engagement. There are also two outlier findings. The first outlier is that one participant who had experience teaching AP courses and college-readiness courses engaged students effectively without the means of over-preparation, technology, and getting students up and active in their learning. The second outlier is that one participant revealed no issues with technology use in the classroom.

**Teachers Alter Instruction and Curriculum to Meet the Needs of Students.** Teachers strive to meet the needs of students and provide them with freedom in the classroom to achieve engagement. My interviews and surveys allowed me to recognize how much teachers prepare and alter their materials to ensure they are getting the most out of their time with students in the classroom. Leite et al. (2018) described the role that cross-curricular planning and skill-based practices within the curriculum bring about greater experiences for students, and this was evident through my interviewing and surveying of participants, as at least nine out of ten participants alluded to doing what was needed to try and meet their students' personal, emotional, and social needs.

Teachers also have a desire to allow for student voice and choice when it comes to their lessons in the high school English classroom. Teachers who I interviewed showed that they take the most tedious of units and alter the unit, so the materials are relative to something students are familiar with or enjoy. Accepting that students are not there because they love the subject matter, teachers use relationships built with students and continue to learn themselves so that they can best prepare for their diverse classrooms of students.

**Expectations of Teachers Have Risen Despite Technology Presence.** While interviewing participants asking about their work loads and amount of time spent on routine tasks, the teachers expressed that a large amount of time was spent on lesson designing, but other hours of the day went toward behavioral management and meetings, faculty tasks, supervision duties, and grading. A few participants did not feel like they got a lunch period during their day. Three participants included that they feel responsibilities heightened upon the return to school after COVID. The expectation for some schools, according to participants, was that students needed to be engaged using applications and updated on lessons through online platforms. In this instance, students' classroom engagement and attendance would probably drop since everything is provided to them online. Not only is this an issue for schools that need graduation rates to remain high, but it is also an issue for teachers who are being held accountable for attendance and pass rates.

**Positive Classroom Environments are Necessary to Achieve Student Engagement.** The participants of this study all stated that the environment can make or break a classroom experience. Reviewing all participants' responses, my view is that teachers have struggled through their careers with classroom management strategies, and when they found working pieces, they kept them and built from their knowledge. Considering my participant who was a

first-year teacher to my participants who have at least five years of experience, I understand that teachers with more experience have more of a concept of how to build a positive learning environment. There is a lack of resources and time in school professional development and building a classroom environment is not a popular practice for teachers, but if everything else was attainable to accomplish after the environment was set, I would believe that building positive classroom environments would be at the top of the yearly training list for all educators to stay up-to-date with the best practices.

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

The implications from my study's thematic findings offer opportunities for policymakers, community members, administrators, teachers, curriculum developers, and students. Participants' perceptions of student engagement and current curricular practices in their high school English classrooms could benefit from changes in courses, school-wide expectations, and best practices provided to teachers. Policymakers can promote skills-based learning and education for the well-rounded global citizen, while administration and teachers can work together with curriculum developers to pose a new course option for students needing English credits.

Administration can use teacher feedback and insight to implement professional development and collaborative opportunities for all educators to foster an engaging, positive classroom environment. Teachers can promote such practices in their classrooms regardless of content area. Teachers can also connect with community members so that students can develop connections and experience real-world opportunities, aligning with students' interests and goals. Curriculum developers, along with teachers, could promote engagement and cater to diverse learners through the development of an English-based course that is not focused on the literary canon and characterization essays, but rather on the building of skillsets and preparing for career

aspirations. Along with all stakeholders involved, students, provided with a multitude of opportunities to engage with their learning, will recognize the experiences provided to them by those who care about their well-being in and outside of the classroom. Collectively, stakeholders can contribute to the enhancement of high school English classrooms, cultivating an empowering, memorable learning experience for all students.

### ***Implications for Policy***

An implication for policy includes school districts creating a presentation for secondary educators developing reasonable, consistent expectations, including tools for educators to utilize in their classrooms. School districts could also delegate these responsibilities to instructional coaches and lead teachers within schools for additional pay or paid time off to complete these tasks. It would be important for secondary educators to have a say in the structure of classrooms and practices, therefore being an effective way to plan this presentation.

Another opportunity for the state or district could be the establishment of a course that meets the criteria of state standards and allows for students to meet graduation requirements. There are other options within each state that would help meet the needs of diverse students, such as changing graduation requirements to reflect their interests, but by utilizing a designed course that would count as cross-curricular or an English skills credit, students could feel a personal sense of engagement before stepping foot in the actual classroom. Much of the work falls on educators when students arrive through their doors, but, in reality, much of the disengagement occurs within the education system.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Educators, as they gain experience, could provide a great deal of classroom practices and strategies. When new high school English educators are provided with a written curriculum and

books to teach, they are often left to creating lessons and building their knowledge base through trial and error. It should be a priority for schools to work on teacher retention by providing resources and collaborative opportunities to build engaging practices and a positive classroom environment. Professional development opportunities could benefit all educators if used in a manner that allows them to create items to utilize in their classrooms during the time provided. These training courses could be a quarterly expectation for teachers and could even take place throughout the district and at all grade levels. Educators have opportunities and are expected to take part in continued education, but these developmental opportunities could count toward their professional learning. While it is evident that professional learning is beneficial for educators, it may also be necessary for all high schools to build collaboration and achieve ideal classroom environments throughout their buildings.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

The theoretical framework that I used for this study was Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986). I presented Bandura's theory in Chapter Two, where I provided Bandura's thoughts regarding human behaviors and how they are affected by a person and their environment (Schunk & Usher, 2012). Since environments alter experiences, by discussing engagement strategies and aligning instruction with desired behaviors, educators expressed that they focused on creating a classroom environment conducive to learning. Schunk and Usher included that students perform better and are directly influenced by teacher instruction, collaborative opportunities, and having a variety of chances to show mastery. Lopez et al. (1997) recognized how academic interest and performance were gleaned from Bandura's social cognitive theory. Participants shared similarly, stating that self-efficacy and interest in high school English mirrored their grades received in a course. By allowing students to gain interest

through instructional activities, teachers will support students' needs by focusing on sound and optimizing class time with engaging practices.

### ***Empirical Implications***

I have worked as a high school English teacher at a variety of schools for over ten years. I have worked with very skilled educators along the way, and I have attended professional development opportunities, with continued learning beside many colleagues in and outside of the English department. The findings of my study allow me to reflect over the opportunities I have received and how to further adapt those opportunities to bring teachers what they are needing: tried resources, structured time, and a curriculum plan. The literature review section of my study includes a citation from Munir & Zaheer (2021) where they allude to the idea that continuous education is necessary for students and educators to thrive in environments within and outside of the classroom. Additionally, Plakhotnik et al. (2021) explained how students' achievement and lifelong success stems from the security within a classroom. Educators' efforts to acclimate to school-wide expectations while still serving students is one of the most prominent factors in establishing student engagement.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

In Chapter Two, I provided that Smith and Fouad (1999) found that students show a greater chance of setting goals when engaging and achieving within a course. Engagement is heightened when students experience opportunities to perform, including positive relationships between teacher and students are in place. Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) remains prominent within high school classrooms. In Chapter Four, I included that a participant named Piper stated, "If you can manage your classroom, that's the first step to achieving a solid



environment.” Behaviors are directly affected by relationships and the environment of a classroom.

My study confirmed that student behaviors, environment, and educators’ roles affect student engagement. I presented Creswell & Guetterman’s (2019) study regarding educators’ consistent challenges and the need to keep up with curriculum and engagement practices. Also, I included Singh’s (2019) research, stating that students’ engagement in purposeful activities and learning help benefit their personal well-being and feelings of safety and ease within a classroom. If teachers are continually supported and met with time and resources to establish solid practices, then the engagement of students can only go up from here. Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1986) allowed me to recognize the importance of factors within the classroom affecting students’ learning experiences just as much as the curriculum itself. Additionally, the contribution that my study brings to high school education is the awareness and putting into place of universal practices to promote positive classroom environments, the development of curriculum with students’ interests in mind, and unwavering teacher support.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The desired sample size for this study was seven participants. The participant criteria required participants to be at least a first-year high school English teacher. I recruited nine participants for interviews and focus groups, and ten total participants for the surveys. Participant demographics were a limitation of my study because of gender inequality, as I had more female participants than males. Most participants were White, with one being Hispanic. I did not limit this study, but it was difficult to find participants who were still in the field of education and willing to take part. The addition of more males and culturally diverse English educators could provide data that would create additional findings and themes. In the data analysis process,

participants' pseudonyms could not be used due to the nature of the anonymous survey. The delimitations of this study include educators who teach full-time English in a high school. I did not include part-time faculty or educators who taught different grade levels outside of ninth through twelfth grades.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

When I began my study, I was unsure which teachers would willingly participate. Since a variety of teachers with different levels of experience and different schools took part, it allowed for space to consider students in different atmospheres as well. I recommend that future research on schools' provided curriculum take place to understand what resources are provided to teachers. Since participants mentioned that they were spending much of their time revamping lessons and creating engaging classroom experiences that met students' interests more closely, it would be significant to see what they are expected to follow by signing on to teach at a specific school. There could also be careful considerations when viewing public expectations and private expectations of curriculum. In viewing the curriculum, it may also benefit learners if a universal skills-based English curriculum was developed for learners to have more opportunities for real-world experiences instead of basing the curriculum around novel studies.

I recommend that future research on teachers' experiences and understanding be supported by observations and classroom time to consider the expectations and practices shared in interviews and surveys. This would allow for a better picture of student needs and strategies in place to improve overall engagement in the classroom. This, alongside the interview and survey processes, would help understand participants' experiences and differences among them. Also, it would be beneficial to study a broader demographic of educators. While I only interviewed two male educators, they both shared that they were the minority in their English departments. Many

educators have also voiced that they changed schools at some point in their careers for a variety of reasons unstated, but it would be ideal to study educators who have been at their current school for at least five years, unless new.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research recognizes the extreme need for engagement in the secondary English classroom, as well as the implications that affect educators and students on a daily basis. By dissecting personal experiences and curricular practices in the classroom, this study could greatly impact pre-service educators, newer educators, seasoned educators, and administrative staff who have the ability to train and retain teachers. The findings highlight the importance of engaging students through instructional practices, relationship-building, and lessening usage of technology. Educators engaging students in their English classrooms will promote a culture of growth and interest, creating an altogether more positive entire school environment.

One of my key takeaways from this research is the need for collective support when it comes to engaging students because it cannot always begin in the classroom. By having the support of instructional coaches and administration to provide educators the time, tools, and resources to collaborate and grow as effective educators, they will enhance their practices for the needs of their learners. Additionally, educators with required curriculum felt the need to teach beyond the requirements and make the curriculum their own for their students' sake. Educators find it important to consider the use of tools and learner interests to design and implement instructional plans tailored to students.

The themes developed in this study prove that educators formulate their own ideas regarding classroom engagement and procedures through personal experience due to a lack of professional opportunities and support beyond the classroom. This study also revealed that there

are many teachers who feel strongly about technology use and lowering of standards to meet the needs of current students. Some are unsure how to improve upon these changes beyond their high school English classrooms.

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## Appendix A

### Liberty University IRB Approval

**IRB #:** IRB-FY23-24-955

**Title:** Exploring the Role of Curricular Engagement in the Secondary English Classroom

**Creation Date:** 12-3-2023

**End Date:**

**Status:** Approved

**Principal Investigator:** Kelsey Baldwin


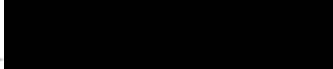

**Review Board:** Research Ethics Office

**Sponsor:**

### Study History

<b>Submission Type</b>	Initial	<b>Review Type</b>	Limited	<b>Decision</b>	<span style="color: #C00000;">Exempt - Limited IRB</span>
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### Key Study Contacts

<b>Member</b>	Rick Bragg	<b>Role</b>	Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b>	
<b>Member</b>	Kelsey Baldwin	<b>Role</b>	Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b>	
<b>Member</b>	Kelsey Baldwin	<b>Role</b>	Primary Contact	<b>Contact</b>	

## Appendix B

Hello,

My name is Kelsey Baldwin, and I am a graduate from Columbia College and the University of Missouri. I am currently an online student at Liberty University earning my PhD in Curriculum and Instruction. I wanted to introduce myself, as well as provide details regarding my study, since I am awaiting IRB approval to move forward with my data collection. I am emailing you at this point so that I will be able to begin communicating with teachers upon the return from holiday break in January.

My study is entitled “Exploring the Role of Curricular Engagement in the Secondary English Classroom”. Ultimately, I would love to hear how educators support student engagement and agency in secondary English classrooms through interviewing, surveying, and discussing their experiences. I have been a secondary English teacher for ten years myself, and I know how engagement has changed dramatically in just a few years for a multitude of reasons. I hope to eventually be able to continue this study to provide administrators, teachers, and students with a more significant classroom experience to benefit students into college or the workforce.

I am hopeful for the opportunity to perform research in your schools. I appreciate your time and efforts in helping me with this process, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you,

Kelsey Baldwin

## Appendix C

December 3, 2023

Dear Participant,

As a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand how educators support student engagement and agency in secondary English classrooms. The purpose of my research is to recognize aspects that affect engagement in the secondary English classroom, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be high school English educators. Participants, if willing, will be asked to take part in individual, virtual, audio-recorded interview (30-45 minutes), virtual, audio-recorded focus group (30-45 minutes), and a brief online survey (10 minutes). For the survey, participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected. For the interview and focus group, names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

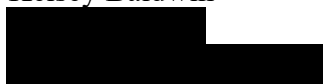
To participate, please read the consent form, sign, and submit so that following procedures may take place. Next, please go to the provided to complete the online survey. Please let me know when works best for you to schedule an interview and I will get it set up.

A consent document will be attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign and return the consent document to me prior to taking part in any procedures.

Participants will be entered into a raffle for a \$50 Amazon gift card for taking part in my research, and the winning participant will receive the gift card via email.

Sincerely,

Kelsey Baldwin



## Appendix D

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** Exploring the Role of Curricular Engagement in the Secondary English Classroom

**Principal Investigator:** Kelsey Baldwin, Doctoral Candidate – School of Education, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a high school English educator. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand how educators support student engagement and agency in secondary English classrooms.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an anonymous, brief online survey that will take no longer than 10 minutes.
2. Choose to participate in one of the two following procedures:
  - a. A virtual, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 30-45 minutes.
  - b. A virtual focus group discussion with other high school English educators that will be virtual and audio-recorded, taking no more than 30-45 minutes.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include a collection of engagement strategies gathered through the study, as well as a well-developed professional development curriculum to benefit educators in high school classrooms. Further, I would like to eventually seek family involvement to improve upon student agency.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

#### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses to the survey will be anonymous.

- Participant responses to the interview and focus group will be kept confidential by replacing names with codes.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer for five years, and then all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for five years and then deleted. Myself, as the researcher, will have access to these recordings.

#### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will be entered into a raffle for a \$50 Amazon gift card. To enter, participants must take part in the survey and either an interview or focus group. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes; however, they will be collected by email after the survey to maintain your anonymity on the surveys.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

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

If you choose to withdraw from the survey portion of the study, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in this study.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Kelsey Baldwin. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Richard Bragg, at [REDACTED].

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your 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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).



*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

<b>Your Consent</b>
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By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure that 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 researcher using the information provided above.

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

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

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Printed Subject Name

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Signature & Date