INCREASING ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to construct a theoretical framework identifying specific voice, choice, and goal setting strategies that impacted student motivation and engagement. The qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews and observations with two teachers and six students to determine what strategies were used to promote motivation and engagement and if they were acted upon by the students. Incorporating information gathered from the interviews and observations, the desired outcome of the research is for educational leaders to reflect on how these strategies can influence student motivation and engagement, resulting in an autonomous learning environment and students becoming partners in their education.
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Isaiah 49:29- He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

It is a goal of the American school system to create learning environments in which students from all backgrounds graduate with high levels of knowledge and skill that will allow them to be competent as they move into college or careers. However, high dropout rates continue to be an epidemic afflicting our nation’s schools. Every year nearly one-third of all public high school students and almost one-half of minorities fail to graduate with their cohort (Smyth, 2006.) The fact that over 3 million students drop out of school every year and more than 1.2 million students fail to graduate with a diploma 4 years after they have entered high school makes this epidemic a national concern (Steinberg & McCray, 2012). According to Klein, Rice, and Levy (2012), these educational failures put the United States, future economic prosperity, global position, and physical safety at risk. Given these documented negative implications at both individual and societal levels, the educational community must recognize the need to understand and respond to the complex relationship of the factors that continue to impede students in the decision-making process in schools (Brenner-Camp, 2011).

These statistics paint a troubling picture for those interested in promoting positive educational outcomes. The lack of collaborative partnerships with students in schools has alienated student ownership and impacted the student’s ability to stay and succeed in school (Mitra, 2003). In order to reduce these achievement gaps, it is critical to identify points of leverage through which student outcomes may be improved. One such device is academic motivation, which is a socio-emotional approach to learning characterized by interest, challenge seeking, participation, and enthusiasm. Motivation and engagement to learn have gained research interest both for their effects on achievement and dropout rates (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Greene & Miller, 1996) and the degree to which they can be influenced through students' learning
environments (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Because high motivation and engagement can be helpful tools for students as they progress through school, interventions and strategies designed to boost students' motivation and engagement may be one strategy through which to improve achievement.

**Background**

In the 19th and 20th centuries, public schooling gradually evolved toward what we all recognize today as conventional schooling. Children now are almost universally identified by their grade in school, much as adults are identified by their job or career. Learning is hard work; it is something that children must be forced to do, not something that will happen naturally through children's self-chosen activities. Professional educators, not students, determine the specific lessons that children must learn; thus, education today is still, as much as ever, a matter of inculcation (Gray, 2008). Historically, our society’s schools have often fallen far short of fostering the development of people who value diversity, who are both autonomous yet cognizant of others’ needs and rights, and who are open-minded yet equipped with critical-thinking skills to analyze contradictory ideas. Instead, many of our schools foster the development of very different sorts of individuals.

Dewey (2004), Freire (1970), Giroux (2003), and McLaren (1994) all have argued that an emphasis on a democratic system in schools should be implemented. This implementation would allow every stakeholder to be given an equal opportunity to participate in a democratic freedom-based education. The concept of democratic schools was to shape student voice around a collaborative culture where teachers facilitate without undermining their autonomy and authority (Wisby, 2011).
To prepare for democratic citizenship, students must learn to exercise their rights and understand their responsibilities. Democratic education supports that process through policies, curriculum, organizational structures, and instructional practices that both teach relevant content and provide opportunities for students to safely practice newly developed skills. Students are provided opportunities to express personal opinions, make meaningful choices, and solve problems together in ways that reflect democratic processes inherent to society.

Statement of the Problem

A 2013 report from the Department of Education outlined that high school graduation rates are at the highest level. Yet, nearly 1.8 million young adults leave high school without a diploma and of those 66 percent are not working (Diplomas Count, 2013). According to U.S. Deputy Secretary Tony Miller (2011), 1 out of every 4 students who enters as a freshman will not graduate with their classmates, if at all. On average, a dropout earns less money, is more likely to be in jail, is less healthy, and is unhappier than a high school graduate.

A Gallup research poll strongly suggested that the longer students stay in school, the less engaged they become (Busteed, 2013). Busteed’s (2013) research found that almost 8 in 10 elementary students who participated in the poll are engaged with school. In middle school, school engagement drops to 6 in 10 students. By the time students reach high school; only 4 in 10 students qualify as engaged. Students should become more engaged as they move through their education, not less.

Therefore, studying the teachers’ conceptions of motivation and engagement will initiate the dialogue among teachers and students, challenge the classroom dynamics, and strengthen students’ ownership of their learning. These resulting effects will raise awareness and discussions amongst educators to rethink their practices to support students in this endeavor.
Purpose and Significance of the Study

Motivating students is important. Without it, teachers have no point of entry. However, it is engagement that is critical because the level of engagement over time is the vehicle through which classroom instruction influences student outcomes. Addressing student motivation within the classroom is necessary and important to the overall achievement and successful development of well-rounded students. Motivation is integral to the learning process. It is the underlying force, which compels a student to perform, to continue to learn, and move to the completion of tasks at hand. Intrinsic motivators play a large part in motivating and engaging students within the classroom. Establishing intrinsic motivation within a student requires educators to see this as one of their primary goals. Without personalization there is a gap between the individual student, his/her learning, and the support they need to succeed in a way that makes sense to his/her interests. Personalization allows students to take ownership of their learning, giving them the opportunity to feel valued, motivated, and in control. It also changes the dynamic between the teacher and the student (Patrick, Kennedy, & Powell, 2013).

The primary concern of this research is to examine the effects of promoting student voice, choice, and goal setting in a classroom on student motivation and engagement in learning. The study of this research provides a lens for turning students into expert learners. For too long, students have been trained to accept the traditional model of learning. A hierarchy with the teacher at the top is used in the traditional model (Lewis, n.d.). The teacher has always been seen as the keeper of knowledge that delivers the standards in small bits throughout the school year. Now is the time to start engagement and promote motivation and ownership.
Research Questions

As the concept of student ownership and increasing motivation and engagement continues to grow, questions do arise. The research will use qualitative methods to investigate the following research questions:

How does voice impact student motivation and engagement?
How does choice impact student motivation and engagement?
How does goal-setting impact student motivation and engagement?

Rationale for the Study

The process by which motivation is developed has been studied mostly in the K-12 school system setting. One particularly useful theoretical framework that has emerged to explain the development of these values and behaviors is Self Determination Theory, which proposes that when students' academic contexts meet their psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, they will be highly motivated and engaged in their schoolwork (Ryan & Deci, 2000). There are certain practices that teachers can utilize to support these needs. When teachers are warm, have autonomy-supportive classroom practices, and have high structure in their classes, students' psychological needs are met; they go on to develop high motivation to learn and high engagement in school (Stroet, Opdenakker, & Minneart, 2013).

Definition of Terms

The following terms relative to the discussion of student voice, choice, and goal setting and their relationship to student engagement and motivation are used for the purpose of this study and are defined here for clarification, as there are multiple definitions in the literature. These include voice, choice, goal setting, student engagement, and motivation. In this study, the definitions are:
**Student voice and choice:** refers to the values, opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students in a school; as well as to instructional approaches and techniques that are based on student choices, interests, passions, and ambitions (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2013).

**Goal setting:** An important component of students' motivation, self-regulation, and achievement in academic settings. A goal is a behavior or outcome that one is consciously trying to perform or attain. Goal setting refers to the process of establishing that behavior or outcome to serve as the aim of one's actions (Bray & McClaskey, 2015).

**Student engagement:** The degree to which students are motivated and committed to learning; demonstrate positive behaviors and attitudes; and have relationships with adults, peers, and parents that support learning (Schunk, 2009).

**Motivation:** The driving force by which we accomplish our goals; typically identified as intrinsic or extrinsic (Schunk, 2009).
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

“We cannot teach students well if we do not know them well. At its heart, personalized learning requires profound shifts in our thinking about education and schooling” (Sizer, 1999). The analysis of personalized learning environments uncovers the theory of placing the learning back in the learner’s hands. As Barbara Bray (2015) suggests, when students take responsibility for their learning they are pushed and become motivated as they initiate their own learning. Students’ interest or engagement in a task is clearly important. Nevertheless, it does not guarantee that students will acquire the kinds of knowledge that will support new learning (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999). As students personalize their learning, they are given opportunities to create authentic projects and demonstrate mastery through their own choice. Progress monitoring feedback provides students with accomplishments of mastery or deficits of non-mastery. Fernchild (2013) proposed that this information allows students to write out learning goals of what they need to know. These learning goals become an action plan that students strive for and realize accomplishments along the way. Cameron Pipkin (2015) claimed that the very qualities, skills, and characteristics that educators seek to grow and develop in our students are the very ones that we as educators need to develop ourselves.

Schools in America have focused on a traditional “one size fits all” model for over 100 years. According to Barbara Bray (2012), this model has left our students unengaged and unchallenged. Learners are beginning to look to alternative methods of schooling like online courses, home schooling, or even dropping out. As systems have realized these failures, they have attempted to implement different curricula paths at the secondary level and apply differentiation to meet the needs of the lower, middle, and higher end students. Theodore Sizer (1999) found “such tinkering never gets to the heart of the matter, especially if the goal is to
know each student well and to use that knowledge in shaping and guiding that young person’s education” (p. 8). To know each student well, as educators we must allow students to have a voice and set goals in their educational journey. Awareness of voice and goals allows teaching to individuals, not a collective whole.

Students have viewed their educational experience as a series of required events. These proceedings are based on dictated curricula from the state or local systems. Students are pushed from one content to another and one grade to another in a linear step-by-step process (Zmuda, Ullman & Curtis, 2015). Our students need to invest in their own learning and passions. The answer to this is through personalizing their learning. This paradigm shift takes the state- and teacher-prescribed educational plan and transfers the actions to the learner. When students take charge of personalizing their own learning, they dictate their pacing for instructional needs and utilize multiple methods and strategies to meet their own learning (Bray & McClaskey, 2015). Words that are synonymous to personalization, yet viewed differently, are differentiation and individualization. Differentiation and individualization are teacher directed. Personalization allows teachers and learners to co-design student learning plans. The shift to personalization encourages educators to be open and flexible, so that learners become more invested in the design of their own learning path (Bray & McClaskey, 2015). Personalized learning requires more than a shift in thinking, it requires bringing in modern technology. According to Brush and Saye (2000), while there is developing evidence that student-centered learning promotes higher-order skills like critical thinking and problem solving, there are difficulties with supporting students to successfully complete activities.

Peggy Grant and Dale Basye (2014) found that personalized learning is an incitement for educators to construct opportunities for learning that takes advantage of the digital skills most
students already possess. Utilizing technology blends traditional classroom learning with online learning, in which students can, in part, control the time, pace, and place of their learning. Twenty-first century learners are capable of collaborating, sharing, and learning with their teachers, peers, and experts. Personal learning networks and connections to tools and resources push students to independence and self-directed learning. Even though students become self-directed, they still must master standards and assessments. Assessments allow the teacher to facilitate in the development of learner profiles. A learner profile allows you to find out as much as possible about what an individual knows and how that individual learns. The goal is to help students label skills and standards they have or have not mastered, set personal goals, and then develop multiple pathways for reaching these goals. When learners are actively engaged and critical assessors of their learning, they make sense of information, relate it to prior knowledge, and use it for new learning (Bray & McClaskey, 2013). Not all students are on board with the move to personalized learning environments. Gregory, Hansen, and Stephens (as cited in Kain, 2003) found numerous elements that contribute to students' resistance to the intellectual work of student-centered learning. They feel that student-centered approaches to learning lead students to look for easy answers and to count on high grades, avoid difficult work, and develop inflated perceptions of their abilities due to society's emphasis on success, instant gratification, and the retail/consumer model of education. Vaughn, Cleveland, & Garrison (2013) claimed that awareness and purpose are the keys to guiding this change and that how we will implement these technologies and define our educational goals must be a collaborative effort.

Technology

In a personalized learning environment, learners have agency to set their own goals for learning, create a reflective process during their journey to attain those goals, and be flexible
enough to take their learning outside the confines of the traditional classroom. Blended learning instructional designs leverage the strengths of both the classroom and online modalities. Horn and Staker (2013) expressed,

“blended learning is any time a student learns, at least in part, at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and, at least in part, through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace. The modalities along each student’s learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience” (Horn & Staker, 2013).

The blended learning instructional model shifts have the potential to result in learning optimization to create more personalized learning opportunities (Patrick, Kennedy, & Powell, 2013).

Learners today are inspired and motivated by different forms of technology due to growing up in a digital landscape (Jukes, 2008). Most students use some form of technology on a daily basis including texting, social networking, and web surfing. Students see these types of technologies as useful and extremely enjoyable. These same students who are accustomed to these types of technologies will relate to using technology at school. If their learning environment mirrors the ways in which they engage with the world, they will excel in their education (Christen, 2009).

Students that use technology are more likely to maintain a focus on learning, show higher levels of class enjoyment, read carefully in preparation for class, and participate more than those who do not use technology (Dorow & Boyle, 1998, as cited in Harper, 2009). Lumley (1991) found that students in traditional classrooms become bored if tasks are too easy and frustrated
when they are too difficult. Using technology to diagnose students’ strengths and then planning activities to build on those strengths builds a student’s motivation to learn and succeed.

Technology is a powerful contributor to learning if it is used to deepen students’ engagement in meaningful and intellectually authentic curriculum. Technology is a tool. It should be selected when it is the best tool for students to learn. Teachers should model the use of technology in support of the curriculum so that children can see the appropriate use of technology and benefit from exposure to more advanced applications that they will then begin to use independently (Murphy, DePasquale, & McNamara, 2003).

Classroom environments that integrate and utilize digital learning tools, such as audio books and reading companion books, have been found to support changes in academic performance and on standardized test scores (Montgomery, 2009). The usage of mobile devices has the potential to enhance learning processes, especially with respect to writing (Swan, Hooft, & Kratcoski, 2005). Another digital tool that can facilitate motivation and engagement in students is a VoiceThread in the classroom, computer lab, or at home (Brunvand & Byrd, 2011).

Holding all students to high standards and providing clear expectations for success in student learning will happen through technology and blended learning. Institutions need to rethink and transform how students engage in content. Clarifying the goals of personalization as the instructional models’ design will intentionally create competency education models that enable personalization and expect mastery.

**Learning Targets**

The term “unpacking” has been used quite frequently over the last few years. For teachers to successfully teach the core standards, they must first “unpack” the standard or deconstruct it. When done in a professional learning community, this process can be very
beneficial to label what students need to be able to know and do. It must be stressed that unpacking a standard is not the creation of a checklist of skills nor is it an overarching instructional objective. The development of a narrow checklist causes practitioners to teach and assess skills in isolation therefore causing students to only utilize the skills in isolation (McTighe, 2012). This segregation prevents students from synthesizing or seeing real-world application. Instructional objectives combine outcomes across a series or an entire unit from a teacher’s point of view. Moss & Brookhart (2012) found that instructional objectives are too broad to guide what happens in a day’s lesson. Foundational skills need to be seen as a cohesive whole and instructional objectives need to be chunked into daily pieces or targets.

A learning target differs from instructional objectives in both design and purpose. Learning targets are developed to guide learning. Skills and reasoning processes are established with students, so they are written from their point of view. Development of targets allows students to give a voice and guide their own learning, therefore promoting student ownership.

Schools that embrace a collaborative culture and that work together on a common focus can utilize learning targets to make decisions about what works, what doesn’t work, and what could work better. Targets will help teachers and students set goals for what students should know and be able to do. In the book, *Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Write Me a Test*, Michelle Goodman (2009) found that an unpacked standard answers the question, “Where am I going in my learning?” A learning target defines the path of how you will get to there.

Targets and assessments can fall into a scaffold of four categories: knowledge, reasoning, performance, and product (Stiggins, 2007). The knowledge category consists of students demonstrating factual and procedural knowledge to be learned outright or retrieved. Words associated with this category are recognize, understand, and explain. The reasoning target calls for...
for students to reason and solve problems. This category is connected with analysis, evaluating, making decisions, and interpreting. A skill target allows a student to demonstrate specific performance skills. Skills can be demonstrated through measures of actions, read-alouds, and discussions. The product or performance target requests students to create quality products. In this category students are able to construct, create, and develop, therefore synthesizing and demonstrating mastery of other categories (Goodman, 2009).

Classroom assessment is an ongoing process through which teachers and students interact to promote greater learning (Butler & McMunn, 2006). Teachers often collect evidence of what they consider to be mastery of a standard. Diagnostic assessments are given before instruction to determine students’ prerequisite knowledge. As teachers and students progress through a lesson or unit of study, formative assessments are given to gauge progress. Summative assessments are given at the end of a unit, as a benchmark, or an end-of-year test.

State standards provide a framework to help teachers and students identify teaching and learning priorities and guide our design and delivery of curriculum and assessments. According to Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005), backward design may be thought of as purposeful task analysis. It allows us to determine how we will accomplish a task. The first step in backwards design is posing the question, “What should students know, understand, and be able to do?” This question can provide bountiful conversations in common planning or professional learning communities. With the push to now create authentic assessments, teachers must collaborate to determine real and professional scenarios that give students clarity for their learning (Wiggins, 1990). The second step in the design process is to align mastery demonstration to learning targets. Without unpacking the standard and developing a solid
conception of what students need to be able to know and do, it is difficult to create an assessment that will offer student mastery information.

Standards-based grading focuses on measuring students’ proficiency on a specific set of outcomes. These outcomes are shared with students at the outset of the course, along with a learning scale or rubric that explains the essential outcome in detail. A student’s progress toward proficiency is tracked by performance on learning tasks that align to the outcome, which encourages student ownership of the learning and allows the teacher to provide accurate feedback to the student. The goal of a standards-based approach is to clearly communicate to students and parents what is expected of the students and how to help them be successful in their educational journey.

To provide accurate data on student performance, teachers and students must be well versed in the criteria for success. Success or mastery criteria are descriptions and concrete examples of what mastery looks like (Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011). Teacher- or student-made exemplars provide visual reinforcement of the task. Popham (2008) suggested that students should be included in defining what quality work looks like in order to meet the criteria expectations. Teachers can begin the process by utilizing a teacher-made rubric and then move into a place where students have a voice in the descriptors of the expectations. When teachers and students work together to design rubrics to score common formative assessments, the rubrics themselves become a part of the learning, not just a way to measure learning. When providing students with exemplar work and asking them what they need to know or do, students are able to then label what they need to know to accomplish the assessment. When students know the mastery criteria, they can be mindful of what mastery looks like as they use the criteria to guide their learning (Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011). Sadler (1989) found that the process of students
being aware of where they are in a target, where they need to go, and what to do to close the gap, allows them to feel in control; therefore, the process promotes student motivation.

**Learner Profiles**

Each learner comes to school with strengths and challenges along with a set of interests, talents, and aspirations. Developing a learning profile enables students to label ways in which they best understand. Every learner can benefit from creating a learner profile. The profile can provide information about a student that learning styles or an Individual Education Plan (IEP) do not. Used as a tool, the learner profile helps a student to identify academic and social-emotional needs, goals, and pace; keep track of them; and enable teachers to use them to truly personalize learning (2Revolutions, 2016).

According to Carol Tomlinson (2001), there are four categories of learning profile factors. Teachers can use the information from group orientation, cognitive style, learning environment, and intelligence preference to plan for curriculum implementation in the classroom. These access points are the connections that make the content and concepts relevant to learners, whether through similar experience, an interest, or tapping into their way of thinking (Powell & Kasuma-Powell, 2011). The teacher designs a supportive learning environment that allows for each student to personalize how he or she access and engage with the content as well as how they demonstrate their understanding. As teachers get to know each of their students better, effective access points become more apparent, therefore promoting a student’s ability to engage and be successful.

When each learner and their teacher understand how the student acquires information best, the learner is more involved in the learning process. By gathering information about each student and tracking individual content mastery and progress, learner profiles allow teachers to
organize, pace, differentiate, and monitor instruction so that each student’s education works for and with him or her. Then, teachers can help them to create goals and pathways to a future they are interested in.

**Goal Setting**

According to Dale Schunk (2009), students' motivation, self-regulation, and achievement in academic settings is supported through the act of goal setting. Writing out learning goals is a way for students to state what they need to be able to do or what constitutes mastery. Understanding how to set realistic goals and developing a blueprint to accomplish these goals are critical in helping students understand who they are as learners, therefore providing them with opportunities to reflect on their educational journey (Romano, Papa, & Saulle, n.d.). Instructing students how to set goals can be divided into three steps: setting realistic goals, developing an action plan, and reflecting on the progress towards meeting the goal. Learning goals for students can begin to take shape by giving them interest, ambition, and talent inventories. Teachers and learners can then identify learning objectives and use their strengths to divide the skills into manageable pieces. Learners are then able to tackle their objectives, monitor their progress in meeting the objectives, and reflect at multiple points in their learning (Bray and McClaskey, 2015). The State of Victoria (2013) suggests that strategies to achieve personal learning goals should be considered while students develop their goals and throughout the monitoring process. Some strategies they suggest may include SMART goals, asking metacognitive questions, or providing visual mental maps.

Goal setting can vary between short- and long-term goals. Some students may have a goal of reading a chapter in a book by the end of the week. Others may set goals of earning an A at the end of the semester after they scored a D at the mid-term mark. It is very important to set
realistic learning goals. According to Dorrit Sasson (2015), having sharp, clearly defined goals that students can measure will allow them to take pride in accomplishing those goals. Realistic learning goals enable students to track sub-skills inside of an objective. Rubrics or mastery criteria can be used to outline levels of accomplishment. Most rubrics provide levels of advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic. These indicators are used to guide and improve performance but also they can be used to make sub-skills of standards clear and explicit to students. It is first necessary to consider the courses, assessments, and/or experiences that are pertinent to the learning goal. In other words, think about what information will help to identify students’ prior knowledge and their achievement on this knowledge. The Center for Assessment (2013) suggests utilizing baseline data from an assessment and an analysis of mastery criteria to inform teachers and learners of what personalization, differentiation, and individualization are needed to meet learning targets. According to James Popham (2008), one of the hallmarks of student motivation is a sense of purpose. Learning targets increase students’ independence by bringing the standards to life and shifting ownership of meeting them from just the teacher to both teacher and students. Popham (2008) also suggests students should be included in defining what quality work looks like and if it meets the rubric’s expectations. Teachers can begin the process by utilizing a teacher’s constructed rubric and then move into a place where students have a voice in the descriptors of the rubric expectations. When teachers and students work together to design rubrics to score common formative assessments, the rubrics themselves become a part of the learning, not just a way to measure learning.

Once a realistic goal is set utilizing student data, an action plan or blueprint can be outlined to make the goal achievable (Romano, Papa, & Saulle, n.d.). By scaffolding instruction, students could be taught what successful learning targets are and what actions they should take to
obtain the learning targets. Teachers must support students in setting goals and developing an action plan through think-alouds, modeling feedback, and self-reporting. Because metacognition often takes the form of an internal dialogue, many students may be unaware of its importance unless the processes were explicitly emphasized by teachers (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999).

Action plans not only include defined steps, but they also bring in timelines and ways to reflect through specific feedback. John Hattie (2009) stated,

“It was only when I discovered that feedback was most powerful when it is from the student to the teacher that I started to understand it better. When teachers seek, or at least are open to, feedback from students as to what students know, what they understand, where they make errors, when they have misconceptions, when they are not engaged-then teaching and learning can be synchronized and powerful. Feedback to teachers helps make learning visible” (p.173).

Hattie (2009) also suggests that self-reporting of student grades is the most powerful strategy out of 138 instructional practices he examined. This critical piece of communicating students’ strengths and weaknesses happens through monitoring the learners’ progress.

According to Romano, Papa, & Saulle (n.d.), students do not consider the influence of the entire goal-setting journey, most only focus on getting to the end point. As teachers and facilitators, it is important to emphasize the growth and reflection that can and will occur. The act of setting, developing, and realizing goals can have a positive impact on students. By setting goals, students can make improvements in their academic performance, motivation to achieve, and their self-confidence (Sasson, 2015). Goals provide students with something specific to strive for. Goals can be highly motivating and lead to skill gains once students have acquired
some competence (Schunk, 2009). Academic performance can be positively affected by a work ethic of tackling sub skills and identifying deficits. Sasson (2015) also suggests that the act of goal setting requires a student to believe in him or herself enough to presume they can follow through and meet the learning target. According to Bray and Mcclaskey (2015), if you don’t believe in yourself or think you cannot do something, it is difficult to get motivated. This confidence or self-efficacy supports a growth mindset. When students own, are motivated by, and are responsible for their own learning, they often discover the purpose of the learning. By setting goals and measuring their achievements, students are able to see what they have done and what they are capable of accomplishing. Seeing their results gives the confidence and assurance that they need to believe they can achieve higher goals. Stronge and Grant (2009), suggest that student goal setting could cause negative consequences for underachieving students if target goals are set too low. They also imply that setting a few goals could take away and narrow the importance of all learning opportunities. Yet, Heidi Grant and Carol Dweck (2003) offer that achievement patterns can be produced as a causal effect of setting goals. The results of goals also mean that learning environments can be constructed in ways that enhance achievement. According to The State of Victoria (2013), the core of the process of developing, monitoring, and self-reporting on personal goals involves conversations between the teacher and learner. These conversations should be open and a part of the culture that is being built.

A formative learning cycle makes teaching and learning visible in ways that raise student achievement (Hattie, 2009). The cycle allows students to label targets and mastery criteria, participate and share in the learning, give and receive feedback, and set goals. When students and teachers set short-term and long-term goals that correlate to the learning cycle, they are being “fed forward.” Feeding a student forward helps them to succeed, see success, and set more
challenging goals (Moss & Brookhart, 2012). Intentional learning that engages students in tracking, reflecting on, and communicating their progress gives the student insight into themselves as a learner. By actively engaging in the process, students are becoming learning partners. Students are now labeling their targets, utilizing mastery criteria and teacher feedback, and taking a more strategic approach to their work. This development of progress monitoring gives students the capability to track their work, strategies they utilize, and reflect on their progression to mastery and how long it may take them to get to mastery or beyond (Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011).

Schools have been doing the same things for hundreds of years. Moving to a student-centered environment requires a cultural shift that encompasses all stakeholders regularly using data to identify learners’ strengths and weaknesses and students identifying learning targets and creating action plans (Pipkin, 2015). Change takes time and is often a difficult process. As a school system, an administrator, or a coach, creating a self-sustaining personalized learning system can provide teacher support. This system can provide technological and universal support in the delivery and design of lessons (Bray & McClaskey, 2015). Student-centered learning requires students to think and learn at their own pace. Leaders need to be open to giving students a voice in setting their personal learning plan. School systems need to move away from pacing guides and allow the learner autonomy over their blueprint for mastering skills. In a student-centered environment, students would be able to work a grade level ahead of their current placement when they are ready. Also, students who need more instruction in on- or below-grade level sub skills could be given additional practice time (Pipkin, 2015). Leaders also need to take into account the way teachers will assign grades. Moving to standards-based grading and the use of rubrics allows stakeholders to see where students have learning gaps or are pushing beyond a
standard (Marzano, 2010). Tomlinson (2000) found that teachers feel torn between teaching standards-based grading and reaching diverse learner needs. Yet, Tomlinson argues that the problem is an impractical interpretation and use of standards that deconstruct successful teaching and learning. One highly significant benefit to standards-based grading is that students are able to assume ownership for their learning as they become personally invested in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for advancement. Another key part that school systems need to pay attention to is scheduling. What works best for individual students should inform schedule development so that other pieces fall into place and allow students to set goals. Moving to personalized learning environments and a personalized learning system provides the opportunity to meet students where they are (Pipkin, 2015).

As we begin to make the change from an educator's role as a traditional "imparter of knowledge" to that of coach or facilitator, teachers may be hesitant to transition. Oftentimes teachers are not equipped to deal with the requirements of managing and implementing student-centered learning environments (Brush and Saye, 2000). For students to be able to own and drive their own learning teachers need help in designing the learner profile and identifying strategies that will help students achieve their goals (Bray, 2012). If we are to meet students where they are, we can start the shift by meeting teachers where they are. Pipkin (2015) offers some insight to this change by suggesting that teachers need ongoing, job-embedded professional development to support the focus on the pedagogical strategies in personalized learning that lead to student success. According to Brett Clark (as cited in Bray & McClaskey, 2015, p. 187), there can never be enough professional development. During professional development opportunities, teachers can share information about data, technology, state standards, and learning strategies as a starting place. Rachel Turner (as cited in Pipkin, 2015) states “We can build on their
knowledge of their craft to take personalized learning to another level.” Most teachers are already utilizing data points to make decisions about grouping, pacing, and assessing. Stronge and Grant (2009) claim that when students do not meet target goals, teachers are at risk for being blamed and being considered the problem. Pipkin (2015) found that by starting slow and adding to teachers’ toolboxes we are able to avoid overwhelming teachers and students. An essential part of supporting teachers is providing strategies for utilizing apps, customizable software, and resources along with web literacy and digital citizenship (Ravitz and Blazevski, 2014). A learning management system (LMS) is a critical piece of technology infrastructure that can be used as a grade portal for parents and students, to house modules and assignments for students to complete online at their own pace, and to provide students with a way to track learning goals (Grant and Basye, 2014). Just as students set goals and reach them, teachers should also set goals and develop action plans. These action plans can be created, modified, and assessed in professional learning communities. Bray and McClaskey (2015) suggest reflecting on your growth. Record your bumps and bruises and victories in a personal journal, blog, or video. Reflections will help you identify meeting your own personal goals.

Portfolios

A portfolio is a purposeful collection of work designed to represent the child’s efforts, progress, and achievement. Portfolios have long been used in the special education setting to track students with disabilities. According to Stockall, Dennis, and Rueter (2014), portfolios typically are an assortment of all of a student’s artifacts rather than a tool to document authentic assessments and mastery. This finding promotes the need for a valid and goal-directed instrument that will identify for teachers and students a richer collection of what students know and can do. Progress monitoring portfolios (PMPs) allow students to monitor their own progress
to determine what problem-solving strategies have worked for them so that they will adjust their thinking when they do not understand a concept. PMPs provide continuous and ongoing information on how students are doing in order to chronicle development, give effective feedback, and encourage students to observe their own growth (Arter & Spandel, 1992). Portfolios can utilize student work and mastery criteria to individualize student learning through providing a deeper insight and understanding of what they are studying. PMPs allow teachers to analyze and assess an individual student’s personal academic needs and goals and identify strengths and weaknesses in order to foster more depth and breadth in the learning process.

Purposeful portfolio selections might encompass samples of students’ before and after work, often with the student reflecting upon or assessing their own growth and goal attainment. Another option in PMPs allows student and teachers to select items that demonstrate the development of one or more learning targets with reflection upon the process that led to mastery. Another alternative with a PMP is to showcase the final products or best work of a student by displaying samples that best characterize the student's current ability to apply germane knowledge and skills (Mueller, 2014). Learning targets, mastery criteria, and goal-setting sheets should also be included in the portfolio. Portfolio decisions need to begin with the goals a student personally sets. The true instructional value and control of developing and implementing PMPs comes when students use mastery criteria and self-reflect and conference to make instructional decisions on their learning.

According to Belgrad and Burke (2008), a PMP is a multisensory and multidimensional personification of a student's learning process. The self-reflection, self-assessment, and evaluation process should be ongoing throughout the PMP data collection. Without those pieces, student voice and ownership is limited. Students need to engage in multiple reflective activities
based on their goals. Specific learning targets and strengths and weaknesses inside the targets provide more meaningful and purposeful data for reflection and self-assessment (Mueller, 2014). Developing good reflective skills requires modeling, application, and practice. When students receive continuous and constructive feedback, the quality of their student work increases, and they are more able to critically self-assess (Belgrad & Burke, 2008).

An e-portfolio is the next step of the PMP progression. Schools that utilize 1:1 technology can use e-portfolios as another way to push student engagement. Batson (2002) describes the e-portfolio as a collection of student work that brings together three trends: the electronic form of student work; the availability of the Internet to allow students to participate in constructivist and connectivity shifts; and the availability of a learning management system to track data points. As schools make the shift to the e-portfolio, it is essential to move beyond replicating the paper-based precursor and fill-in the blank reflection forms. Helen Barret (2006) found that ownership and engagement in an e-portfolio stems from authentic opportunities and technologies.

Relationships

Teachers play a vital role in their students’ engagement and motivation (Hill & Rowe, 1996). Although much is intrinsic to the student, research has found that teacher’s play a vital role on their students’ motivation and engagement. When teachers form positive bonds with students, classrooms become supportive spaces in which students can engage in academically and socially productive ways (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Students who have positive relationships with their teachers use them as a secure base from which they can explore the classroom and school setting both academically and socially, to take on academic challenges, and work on social-emotional development (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). This includes relationships with peers
and developing self-esteem and self-concept (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Through these secure relationships, students learn about socially appropriate behaviors as well as academic expectations and how to achieve these expectations (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

A possible reason for the association between academic improvement and positive teacher-student relationships is students’ motivation and desire to learn (Wentzel, 2002). Students who perceive their relationship with their teacher as positive, warm, and close are motivated to be more engaged in school and to improve their academic achievement (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001). Wentzel (2002) found that a students’ motivation to learn is impacted positively by having a caring and supportive relationship with a teacher.

Motivation is closely linked to students’ perceptions of teacher expectations. Students who perceive that their teachers have high expectations of their academic achievement are more motivated to try to meet those expectations and perform better academically than their peers who sense low expectations from their teachers (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999). Due to the impact of expectations on motivation, expectations can be an important factor on a student’s academic achievement.

Students with high self-esteem are more likely to identify their potential value and set higher goals (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Students with high self-esteem are more likely to have positive relationships with peers as well as with adults (Orth, Robbins, & Widaman, 2012). The support of positive teacher-student relationships for self-esteem and related social outcomes affects students during schooling as well as in their future educational and occupational outcomes (Orth, Robbins, & Widaman, 2012).

Motivation is furthered when students’ have a feeling that they fit within the school community. When students believed they belonged within the school community, they
demonstrated higher levels of academic motivation than those students who did not feel they belonged (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Osterman (2000) found that a strong positive relationship exists between students’ awareness that they relate or belong in their school community and their academic engagement. Additionally, Maslow (1954) believed that physiological and safety needs must be met before a person can perceive that they belong.

Educational leaders must improve their efforts to promote motivation and engagement through positive relationships. While much of the motivation is intrinsic to the student, teachers play a vital role and can be proactive in cultivating student engagement. Increased student engagement and motivation is key to academic and behavioral success.

Summary

The conclusion drawn based on the analysis of resources supports voice, choice, and goal setting in personalized learning environments. The literature supports understanding and developing the creation of a school culture that values a student-centered classroom and identifies learner needs. According to Cameron Pipkin (2015), research is informing everything that occurs in the personalized classroom. Hard data and peer-reviewed research are confirming the great potential of a well-implemented personalized learning model for creating rich, engaging learning environments that result in dramatic improvements in student achievement. Bray and McClaskey (2015) found that the learning becomes meaningful when learners are able to identify goals for their learning plan and benchmark their progress. This unique pathway allows learners to have voice and choice in how they guide their own goals and standards-based learning targets. Personal learning goals are connected to student achievement and building the capacity of learners. These goals motivate students to achieve their full potential by becoming active participants in their learning and building their efficacy. The research from The State of Victoria
(2013) supported learners in building relationships by conversing with their teacher throughout the process of identifying strategies they utilized to set their goal, monitoring their progress, and realizing their achievements. Romano, Papa, and Saulle (n.d.) also supported this opinion and stressed students reflecting on their journey.

All of the literature utilized for information on teacher efficacy maintained that teachers need support in this culture change. The paradigm shift of going from the “sage on the stage” and the “keeper of knowledge” to the facilitator is scary. Pipkin, Clark, Bray, and McClaskey all agree that professional development opportunities must be in place for personalized learning environments to see success.

In an age where transformational learning continues to evolve, more research is necessary to thoroughly comprehend the subject especially when looking at voice, choice, and setting short-term goals through the use of mastery criteria and exemplar student work. This research would support short-term goals and allow students to realize mastery at quicker rates. Another subject that deserves more attention is that of student progress monitoring and what strategies could be in place for students to take ownership and self-report as they see issues in their mastery. Though some of the literature did provide information on teachers needing to model metacognition, more research needs to be done on when and how educators move from facilitator back to teacher for clarification purposes.

Motivation and engagement to learn has gained research interest both for its effects on achievement and dropout rates (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Greene & Miller, 1996) and the degree to which it can be influenced through students' learning environments. This will allow us to motivate our students and have them take ownership of their learning. Advances in technology allow educators to put the learning, goal setting, and progress monitoring into students’ hands.
Learners are able to inquire about their own interests, and as educators we need to harness this enthusiasm. Teachers now more than ever are more open to change and collaboration as the need for a shift in how we do business continues to grow. As we begin to view and understand students as learners, we will be able to collaborate with students to determine what is best for their educational journey. As a nation we have to get away from the traditional style of teaching. As educators we have to push our limits to reach each individual child at their level of instructional need. We owe it to our students to develop a culture of ownership through personalized learning environments with voice, choice, and goal setting.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is holistic, inductive, and empathetic and it is generally conducted in a natural setting that contends with issues that are of social and human concern (Creswell, 2005). Merriam (1988) describes a qualitative inquiry as one that is characterized by an understanding of the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection, and uses an inductive research strategy. The intent of this study was to provide an in-depth analysis of how elementary school teacher’s practices shaped student motivation and engagement. According to Berg (2001), systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group, permits the researcher to effectively understand how it operates or functions. This qualitative study was a descriptive record of teacher and student perception and experience collected and detailed through a variety of informational data sources. The focus of inquiry was “How does voice, choice, and goal setting impact student motivation and engagement?”

The qualitative approach is merited when the type of research questions requires exploration (Stake, 1995). Qualitative research questions often begin with how or what, so that the researcher can gain an in-depth understanding of what is going on in relation to the topic (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998). A qualitative study allows the researcher to explore phenomena, such as feelings or thought processes, that are difficult to extract or learn about through conventional research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For the present study, exploration focused on participants’ perceptions and lived experiences (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) found that qualitative research methods are the best approach when
studying phenomena in their natural settings and when one is striving to understand social processes in context (Esterberg, 2002). Qualitative methods emphasize the researcher’s role as an active participant in the study (Creswell, 2005). In this study, the researcher was the key instrument in data collection, and the interpreter of data findings (Stake, 1995).

The heuristic nature of this qualitative design allowed the researcher to experience the richness and complexity of meanings participants brought into the investigation, and allowed the researcher to make modifications as information unfolded (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). As the researcher conducted the study, the data was collected and analyzed concurrently so that necessary adjustments were made to the research process as the need arose (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Research Strategy**

The main qualitative strategy for this body of research was the case study. A case study offers a broad approach and is well used in understanding a particular phenomenon within a social unit. Although the scope of a case study is delimited in context and the findings can rarely be generalized, it, however, provides rich and significant insights into events and experience (Brown, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Noor (2008) and Stake (1995) described a case study as an empirical inquiry that explores contemporary phenomenon within real-life context, using multiple sources of evidence. The evidence used in a case study “is typically qualitative in nature and focuses on developing an in-depth, rather than broad, generalizable understanding” (Noor, 2008, p. 1602). Esysench (1976) found that the phenomenon of a study is not the hope of proving anything, but rather the hope of learning something.

Through the use of a case study as a strategy for this qualitative research, all evidence was gathered to generate a quality analysis, as well as to present evidence with the possibility of
exploring an alternative interpretation (Yin, 2003). The flexibility in a qualitative study permits changes to be made to the overall design of the inquiry when useful information is revealed during the data collection stage. Conversely, the study design is continual, allowing data collections to be adjusted according to what is learned (Yin, 2003). The use of a case study for this qualitative inquiry was a sufficient method to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers’ and student’s conceptions of the impact of student motivation and engagement through student voice, choice, and goal setting. This method is preferred when compared to other methods in social science research methodology (Hoepfl, 1997; Merriam, 1998).

Douglas and Moustakas (1985) stated that the heuristic nature of inquiry allowed a “self-reflection through dialogues with participants, and creative depictions of experience to generate a comprehensive knowledge” about the phenomenon of interest (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40). Simply put, the researcher came to understand the essence of the phenomenon, the teachers’ understanding of student engagement and motivation, through shared reflection and inquiry (Kleining & Witt, 2000).

Setting for the Study

The research setting is located in the eastern corridor of Tennessee. The urban elementary school serves approximately 375 students. Thirty-five teachers that differ in age, background, and diversity provide instruction. Eighty-five percent of the students are considered minorities and ninety-three percent of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Fifty-one percent of the students are male and 49 percent are female. The students range in age from four to eleven years old. The school’s academic performance is far behind a majority of the state. The elementary school is ranked 334th out of 338 of all elementary schools in the state of Tennessee.
Participants

For the purpose of this case study, teachers will be defined as those adults in the school with teaching certifications, have teaching assignments, and classroom assignments. Support staff was not utilized in this case study. Students identified for this study were selected based on their enrollment in teacher classrooms. The inquiry was conducted inside of the school district in which the researcher worked because an outside researcher might be perceived as having no understanding of the culture of the school; this is known as the emic perspective, or the insider view in educational research (Rossman & Rallis, 2013). The emic is perceived by a number of educational scholars as being more relevant in the interpretation of a culture and in the understanding of cultural experiences within a particular group (Saville-Troike, 1989). The choice of the school was an expeditious way to obtain the data needed; more importantly was the need to ensure that participants did not feel any coercion to participate (Creswell, 2005).

Prior to selecting participants, the executive principal gave permission to the researcher to seek out members for this qualitative study (see Appendix A). Criteria that was important when selecting volunteers was a valid teaching certification, at least two years of experience, and had an assigned classroom. These criterion promoted the sampling method know as criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling was used for this qualitative case study as a design strategy to gather data from information rich participants about their conceptions of student motivation and engagement. Purposeful sampling ensured that selected participants met the criteria earlier discussed. It is a strategy that allowed selection of the teaching staff and ensured credibility of sample and consistency of data (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). An appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that sufficiently answers the research questions and often becomes recognizable as the study progresses and as new themes or explanations stop
emerging (Marshall, 1996). Prior to having participants sign letters of consent to participate in the study, approval was sought from the Institutional Review Board. Once the approval was granted, participants were selected and data collection and analysis began (see Appendix B & C).

**Data Collection Methods**

A strong case study includes multiple sources of data (Yin, 1993; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). The data sources available provided for multiple perspectives that supported the appreciation of the complexity of the research questions as they related to the elementary school. The concept of methods refers in general to the appropriate use of techniques of data collection and analysis (Prasad, 2005). In a case study, it is important to converge sources of data, also known as triangulation, as a means to ensure comprehensive results that reflect the participants’ understandings as accurately as possible. Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) correspond that triangulation is essential to performing case study reliably.

The principal drive of data collection in a research analysis is to gather information to answer the research questions that were asked in the study. Data collection in qualitative research provides evidence for the experience the study is investigating. Based on the scope of this research, which focused on making meaning, the researcher selected interviewing as the primary data collection vehicle, and then enhanced the data with other additional data points. Data was collected through semi-structured instruments: transcripted interviews and observations of the classroom, teacher and student participants. The researcher was the human instrument for data collection and, as such, took into consideration the total context by interviewing the participants as well as recording non-verbal responses (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The interview involved face-to-face conversations with participants. Kahn and Cannell (1957) described interviewing as “a conversation with a purpose.” Observations took place in the classroom setting. Observation is
an essential and greatly important approach in qualitative case studies. It is used to discover complex interactions in natural social settings (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Developing and utilizing survey research is another mode for making inferences about a group of people based on data from a small number of individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Documents, such as student work and student reflections are another source of valuable data that can be collected throughout the course of study.

The data collection process was conducted as follows:

1. Initial Teacher Interviews
2. Preliminary Student Interviews
3. Classroom Observations (2 per classroom over one month)
4. Post-Observation Teacher Interview (following each observation)
5. Post- Observation Student Interviews (following each observation)

Figure 3.1 presents the process for data collection

Figure 3.1

Data Collection Process
Interviews

Qualitative interviewing is appropriately used when “studying people’s understanding of the meaning in their lived world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 105). Interviewing teachers allowed for identifying and soliciting knowledge from those who Patton (2002) calls, key informants. Key informants are people who are particularly knowledgeable about the inquiry setting and express their knowledge, and whose insights can be helpful in assisting an observer in understanding events that have happened and reasons why those events happened.

For this research, one-on-one interview sessions took place between the researcher and the elementary school teachers. The use of semi-structured interviews for this study involved fixed open-ended questions that were based on the phenomenon of the study and were asked of all participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This provided opportunities for both the researcher and participants to discuss the topic in more detail and used probes to clarify and elaborate responses to questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Questions for teacher participants were developed around the concepts identified in the literature review and also aligned with language common amongst educators and associated with goals of the elementary school and school district.

The interviews were arranged to take place between February 20, 2017 and March 10, 2017 and were conducted before school and after school to prevent interruption of teachers’ primary assignments. The on-site interviews lasted approximately 30 - 45 minutes. Student interviews took place during morning work time and lasted approximately 20 minutes. Follow up sessions helped to clarify and add detail as needed. Technology was used to assist with collection, transcription, coding and the security of data. Audio recording was used to record interviews. Themes from the semi-structured interviews were identified after recording,
transcription and coding. Participant check-ins supported validity and understanding and included a variety of activities based on participant preference including conversations to clarify meaning, add information, review transcripts and discuss themes identified (Creswell, 2005; Stake, 2005). Participants were given opportunities to evaluate the summary of the interviews via Google Docs, to ensure that the researcher had captured all the major points and to remove anything from the record that she would not like reported (see Appendix D).

Initial teacher interview questions:

1. How do you motivate and engage students in your classroom?
2. Describe the behavior and affective qualities of students who you would describe as engaged in your classroom.
3. Describe the types of student work that you think are most effective for learning.
4. What voice and choice opportunities do you provide your students?
5. Describe how you have used goal setting in your classroom.
6. Describe the feedback that you give your students on a regular basis.

Initial Student Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Can you explain how your teachers motivate and engage you in their class?
3. Describe the kinds of class work that you do that motivates and engages you.
4. How does your teacher give you a voice or a choice in your learning?
5. What information do you use for goal setting?
6. Does goal setting motivate you?
Participant Classroom Observation

Observations in the elementary school participant classrooms were conducted to identify artifacts, triangulate data as well to help illuminate, categorize and describe emerging findings and contextualize interviews and focus group data (Merriman, 2009). To build a relationship with the participants and to become informed about the meaning each participant made of the lived experience, a minimum of 2 visitations were made to each participant's classroom simply for observation purposes and were adequate for describing the setting, for meeting the study needs, and for helping to answer research questions (Patton, 2002). Every visitation was performed during the same time of the school day. Kindergarten through second grade receives 150 minutes of reading instruction in the morning and 120 minutes of math in the afternoon with 30 minutes of science and or social studies. Third through fifth grade departmentalize. Their reading and science block is 120 minutes and the math and social studies block is also 120 minutes. Ongoing narrative field notes were scribed from the time the researcher entered the classroom for the lesson until the end of the period, including participants’ gestures and expressed body language (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Observational field notes also integrated descriptions of the physical setting of the classrooms, tools used to support student voice (such as protocols, organizational tools, anchor charts, and data binders), interactions (class meetings, students-teacher and student-student), and evidence of student choice in learning activities, modes of learning and student products.

The researcher could not assume each block was the same, therefore persistent attentiveness was given to researcher bias and subjectivity (Boyer & Bishop, 2004; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The use of observation for this study afforded a source of additional data that helped to compare interview responses with classroom practices/participation and did not require
the researcher and participants to have direct interactions. The observation augmented when combined with other methods of data collection (Adler & Adler, 1994).

Post-Observation Teacher Questions
1. Were your students motivated and engaged in your observed lesson?
2. What evidence do you have that your students were engaged in the lesson?

Post-Observation Student Questions
1. Were you motivated and engaged in your work during the class period?
2. What evidence supports your engagement?
3. With reference to this specific event in class, explain how you were engaged with your learning?

Artifacts and Document Examination

Valuable data included objects and artifacts that became apparent through the classroom observations and interviews. In classrooms that supported motivation and engagement, artifacts that supported a deeper understanding in this case study included student choice projects, rubrics/success criteria, differentiated curriculum materials and technology, graphics/charts and other evidence of student voice and choice. These artifacts helped to describe and explain the various opportunities, interpretations and roles of voice and choice found across the participants classrooms (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 1984). Follow up conversations with teacher participants about artifacts identified through classroom observations also helped to supplement the data from interviews.

Documents in this study referred to lesson plans, student goal-setting sheets, anchor charts, and student products. These artifacts were examined to support interviews, observations, and supplied additional data that was helpful in clarifying what teachers and students had described in their interviews (Cresswell, 2013). The material enabled the researcher to gather
information on how practitioners were able to support engagement and motivation through voice, choice, and student goal setting.

**Reflective Journal**

A reflective journal for this study was established as a guide to keep a variety of information that raised the need for further understanding of the phenomenon under study. A reflective journal in this investigation was a diary, which the researcher kept throughout the process, to reflect on a variety of information about self and the method of investigation. The entries were deliberate notes taken by the researcher throughout the study to augment other sources of data collection. The purpose was to document behaviors of participants and reactions to the phenomenon under investigation. There was no time limitation set for using the journal during the interview process because information was freely written during interviews as the need arose. However, a time limitation of ten minutes was set to write thoughts and feelings at the end of every classroom visit (Hayes, 2006).

Figure 2 presents the process of data analysis

Figure 3.2

*Data Analysis Process*
Proposed Data Analysis

A qualitative research study involves a continuous relationship between data collection and data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Constant with the qualitative research approach to data collection, data analysis was ongoing in nature following the first interview to begin identifying patterns, and to facilitate succeeding data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A qualitative study exploits ordinary ways of making sense (Stake, 1995). Purposeful sampling was most beneficial to this study because it allowed data review and analysis to be done in conjunction with data collection (Patton, 2002). Holistic analysis and, where applicable, an embedded analysis was used to understand the true conceptions of teachers about student motivation and engagement (Yin, 1984; Stake, 2005, Creswell, 2013).

The dissertation research followed the data analysis and coding procedures suggested by Creswell (2009) and Esterberg (2002). Specifically, Esterberg (2002) advised that open coding is a process where “you work intensively with your data, line by line, identifying themes and categories that seem of interest” (p. 158). Additionally, Creswell (2009) instructed the traditional approach in the social sciences that allows the codes to emerge during the data analysis (p. 187). The coding allowed all field notes, observation reflections, and student work to be analyzed and filed by date (Mertens, 2005). The coding was filed in a table with tentative labels for chunks of data that summarize participants’ words and establish properties of each code. The data coded from the observations and interviews used criteria as follows:
Table 1 presents a summary of how data will be coded

Table 3.1

**Observation and Interview Coding System**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Acted Upon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>Describing the opportunities that promote students voicing what they want to learn or are interested in</td>
<td>V</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Describing the opportunities that promote students choosing how they want to interact with content</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal-Setting</td>
<td>Describing the opportunities that promote students setting short- term and long term-goals</td>
<td>G</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments made by participants, as well as data collected during classroom observations were coded based on whether they exhibit or express voice, choice, or goal-setting. This information was then subdivided into the categories for analysis. Axial coding was used to support concepts and categories while re-reading the text to confirm that the concepts and categories accurately represented interview responses and allowed exploration on how concepts and categories were related.

**Role of the Researcher**

The role the researcher plays is a significant distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. The primary instrument for data collection and analysis in case study research is the researcher herself. As a researcher advances through the research process, the examiner must recognize he or she is a human instrument and the chief research tool. Per se, it is imperative for researchers to consider their own biases, limitations, and views throughout data collection, analysis, interpretation, and the reporting phases of the process. Qualitative research
assumes that the researcher’s biases and values impact the outcome of any study (Merriam, 1998). To authorize any audience of qualitative studies to evaluate the validity of conclusions generalized from data, researchers should, as part of the study, nullify or confine their biases by stating them explicitly to the full extent possible (Altheide & Johnson, 1994).

The researcher has many years of teaching experience in high poverty urban school settings that range from teaching at elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. The researcher recognized that the study was being conducted during a time when teacher expectations are at a new high. Recent reforms taking place in the state of Tennessee and district include the new TEAM evaluation tool, transition from TN State Standards to TNReady Standards, and the new TNReady student assessment. Therefore, it was necessary that the researcher recognized the level of anxiety in the teaching profession and explained in detail the purpose of the study. It was made clear that the interviews and observations were not evaluative of practices.

The qualitative research was wholly designed to explore teachers’ conceptions of student motivation and engagement without student participation. Therefore, no student was involved in the study and data collection was limited exclusively to teachers. The researcher used a semi-structured interview to ask questions from the participants, listened actively to their responses, and adapted to unforeseen circumstances that arose during the study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002).

Having worked in the school district for twelve years, the researcher had a grasp of the phenomenon of study. Precautions were taken to ensure that the researcher’s values did not interfere with the analysis of data by enumerating them before the onset of the research and exclusively designed protocols that eliminated them from the study. The researcher completed
the training required for the Institutional Review Board process to establish that participant’s rights were protected in the study. As well as having all participants sign a letter of consent and they received a copy of it.

The research study was neither evaluative nor prescriptive of teaching methods; however, the researcher expected the findings to positively inform the context that promotes student motivation and engagement in education. Confidentiality was maintained and the researcher remained ethical, authentic, and credible throughout the course of this qualitative case study (Creswell, 2013; Melrose, 2001).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

There are limitations and delimitations to this study. Although the study had many participants, the study focused on data collected from a small sample. The scope of this study is delimited because it explores teachers’ conceptions of student voice, choice, and goal settings impact on student motivation and engagement in one elementary school, as opposed to many schools throughout the district. Therefore, results should not be applied to similar contexts.

One limitation is the role of the researcher in a qualitative study, when he or she “is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 1998, p.42). This reflects the subjective nature of the qualitative method, and human perception can be “very selective” (Merriam, 1998, p.95). Another limitation is that data collection is related to the willingness of research participants to co-operate, and provide honest responses to the interview questions (Merriam, 1998). An additional limitation would be that a qualitative case study may not adequately answer the research questions because of the limited number of participants in the study. However, this study’s triangulations of data helped to verify results, and help to support the accuracy of the themes fleshed out of the interview transcripts.
The result of this research should be considered with these limitations, although as mentioned earlier, there are various sources of data, which attempted to both minimize the limitations and provide in-depth insight into students’ motivation and engagement from different perspectives.

**Ethical Considerations**

When conducting this case study, the ethical issues and safety of the participants will be kept in mind. Every teacher who participated in this study freely consented to participate, without being coerced or unfairly pressured. Participants were well informed about what participation necessitated, and were reassured that withdrawing or declining would not affect them in any way or form (Patton & Cochran, 2002). For ethical purposes, the researcher on potential issues implemented a vetting protocol before using it. Participants were also given the opportunity to review and make necessary changes in information collected from them. This was necessary because they were considered as co-collaborators in this study (Creswell, 2013; Patton & Cochran, 2002; Yin, 1984).

Ethics refers to the correct rules and moral obligations necessary when carrying out the research (McLeod, 2015). Participant welfare will be ensured through consent and anonymity. Consent involves the procedure by which an individual may choose whether or not to participate in a study. Two types of consent were needed to conduct research: direct consent and substitute consent. Direct consent was obtained directly from the participant involved in the study. Substitute consent was needed to utilize student work, as students were under the age of 18. No identifying information from participants was gathered, such as name, address, and phone number. The information collected was kept for the anonymity of the participants.
The research findings were reported according to the highest standard of ethical practice, both with respect to participants and with respect to the execution of professional conduct in research. Participants reviewed the findings before reporting to agree on accuracy and to ensure that they were not reflective of the researcher's personal views. As a matter of ethical principle, participants’ rights, requests, and wishes were safeguarded before reporting the data (Creswell 2013; Seidman, 2006).

**Summary**

The methodology and methods for this qualitative case study were designed with the purpose to understand the teachers’ conceptions of student motivation and engagement and how student voice, choice, and goal setting impacted that. This chapter also provided the rationale for the methodological decisions for this study. The theoretical perspectives, methodology, and methods helped to illuminate the various complexities and experiences of the participants included in this case study research.

The researcher was interested in how meanings are produced and reproduced within social and phenomenon contexts. Therefore, maintaining a reflexive relationship by demonstrating a methodological and theoretical openness and honest awareness of interactions between the researcher and participants was necessary. In essence, keeping record of thoughts, feeling, and activities associated with the study were used to maintain reflexivity (Lambert, Jomeen, & McSherry, 2010).
CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The qualitative study’s intent was to explore the extent of voice, choice, and goal setting on student motivation and engagement. The theory developed provides an explanation of how the implementation of specific strategies resulted in more motivated and engaged students. The study involved collecting data through open-ended, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with two teachers and six students and classroom observations. The building-level administrator helped to identify the purposeful sampling group in order to examine teachers that he perceived to have had an impact on their student’s engagement and motivation in the building. The researcher analyzed teacher and students’ responses and observations related to the following research questions:

1) How does voice impact student motivation and engagement?

2) How does choice impact student motivation and engagement?

3) How does goal-setting impact student motivation and engagement?

Participants Background in Chapter 4

The two teacher participants represented a difference in years of experience, grade-levels taught, and educational background. Student participants characterized a variety of gender, age, and ethnicity. The disaggregation of student participants included four males and two females, and age range of 8 to 11.
Table 2 presents a summary of information about the participants in the study.

Table 4.2

*Demographics of Teacher and Student Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 1: “Ms. Kelly”</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 2: “Ms. Martin”</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1 A: “Alonso”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 1 B: “Dani”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 1 C: “Marty”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2 A: “Amos”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2 B: “Jamar”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2 C: “Lesa”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teacher Participant’s Definition of Motivation and Engagement**

During the initial interview, the researcher sought to have the teachers explain their understanding of what they determined as a motivated and engaged student or expert learner. Ms. Kelly broadly defined engagement and motivation as “students in ready to learn positions that work collaboratively.” Ms. Martin offered specific requirements in her definition including referencing active participation, utilizing technology properly, staying on topic and task, and
helping others without being asked. The researcher then shared with them the definitions of voice, choice, and goal setting, as this would be the focus of the observations and follow-up interviews. This allowed the researcher to set the context for the study and give the teachers an opportunity to express their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences with each of these terms. Teachers were asked if they could identify pedagogical choices that affect student voice, choices, and goal setting. Each teacher was able to give examples of how they use instructional strategies or procedures to provide opportunities in each of the three areas. Examples from each teacher are presented in table 4.3.

Table 3 presents a summary of information about instructional strategies or procedures used for voice, choice, and goal setting.

Table 4.3

Strategies and Procedures to Support Motivation and Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Goal Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Kelly</td>
<td>• Beginning of year surveys</td>
<td>• Partner opportunities</td>
<td>• Bi-weekly progress monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Individual conversations</td>
<td>• Choices on culminating activities/projects</td>
<td>• Student data tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Quick writes about students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Small group activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Asking opinions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Martin</td>
<td>• Asking how they want to engage with the learning</td>
<td>• Partners</td>
<td>• Intentionally assess data to assign reasonable bi-weekly goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Centers</td>
<td>• Daily behavioral goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Choices on culminating activities/project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interactive math sites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

The researcher identified six major themes of voice, choice, and goal setting that supported student’s motivation and engagement in the classroom setting. These themes included learner profiles, partnerships that lead to leadership, choice of projects, choice of strategies, choice of small groups/partners, and short term goal setting. The implementations of these themes led to students feeling more engaged and motivated, and were perceived in observations as motivated to learn and engaged in the learning.

Research Question 1:
How does voice impact student motivation and engagement?

When determining what voice opportunities will impact student motivation and engagement one must first ask, “What is student voice?” Student voice can be referred to as the pedagogies in which students have the opportunity to influence decisions that will shape their lives and those of their peers in or outside of the school setting. Student voice encompasses thoughts, feelings, visions, and actions of the students themselves. The term “student voice” is very broad. Learner voice oriented activities can start with students expressing their opinion and perspective in life and learning and then progressively move to leaders of change. One way for students to begin using their voice is through personal learner profiles. These tools provide students the opportunity to inform their educators of their strengths, challenges, interests, and aspirations. Ms. Kelly felt that the information she gained from surveys and student conversations allowed her to develop a classroom environment that supported student growth and relationships. When teachers have a better understanding of each individual student, it allows the teacher to develop more opportunities for students to access information, engage in
the content, and express what they know and understand. The goal is for students to use their voice to develop partnerships that lead to leadership. Ms. Martin seeks out opportunities for students to use their voice to lead whole group class discussions and small group projects. As students participate in activities that allow them to become stakeholders, adults are still leading and modeling how students can use their voice. Learners that have regular opportunities to advocate for themselves become partners in their learning. Eventually, students are prepared to take leadership roles in the classroom, such as facilitators, problem solvers, and decision makers therefore making them more motivated and engaged.

**Theme 1: Learner Profiles**

Learner profiles are one way to help students learn about themselves and reflect on how they can and want to learn and work with others. Profiles shouldn’t be just about test scores or for teachers to prescribe necessary instruction, intervention, enrichment, and/or mediations. In order for students to take ownership of their learning, they need to have an understanding about themselves, how they learn, and how they work with their classmates. When interviewing Ms. Kelly, she reported that she collected student information through surveys and conversations. At the beginning of the year, Ms. Kelly allowed students to write about things they wanted her to know. She stated that she asks student opinions on what they are learning and how they are presented information. Ms. Kelly was very blunt when she said, “I will not let my students fail - I have to know them.” Ms. Martin’s approach at learner profiles is very much the same. She spent a lot of time at the beginning of the year getting to know each individual. “I have to be a different teacher for each of the different learners. This year is more like being in a play to get them engaged and focused. It is physically exhausting, but I know it is what they need.”
Students interviewed were asked how his or her teacher motivated and engaged them.

Dani was very animated as she spoke about her prospects:

Well, she never let’s us fail. Like if we fail a test with a C, she use to ask us if we want to retake it. She won’t push us to it, but she would ask if we want to retake it. Now if we completely fail it, it’s not a question we ask to re-take it. She puts us up. She has conversations with us and she sits down with us and if we need time she will find a good time and just sit down with us and talk to us and she’ll sit down with us and listen to us. She won’t cut us off or anything. She’s really good about knowing all of us. She’s really good at that. She just let’s us talk and she just listens.

When discussing voice opportunities that were observed in Ms. Martin’s class Lesa made a clear connection between the teacher knowing her as an individual and as a learner:

I love learning with Ms. Montebello because she is a great helper and she’s a great learner. She know about us and she teaches us stuff that we need in the real world, how we need to use it, and that we do need to use it. Mostly this year I’m so excited that I get to learn with her because my cousin got to learn with her and it’s really fun because Ms. Montebello is so exciting, she’s respectful, she love each of us like we her child and everything. She take care of us if we needed it.

Learner profiles support teachers in transferring to students what they know about them as individuals and as a whole. This information sustains learners to make good choices when taking ownership of their learning.

**Theme 2: Partnership to Leadership**

Encouraging and developing student voice is an investment to achieve our shared goal of developing each and every student in our classrooms. It builds confidence and interpersonal and
intrapersonal skills that will continue to shape students' adult lives. These interactions allow teachers to go from “sage on the stage” to “partner on the side.” Students need to practice learning in context to be able to internalize and make the learning their own.

During a classroom observation in Ms. Martin’s room, Amos was perceived as leading his peers in a reflective conversation about their behavior from the day before. When the researcher spoke with Amos about this interaction, he was visibly excited, as he pushed forward in his chair and smiled. He shared that he liked directing people and that it made him feel happy to lead the class in reflecting and voting. Ms. Martin’s student, Lesa, spoke about assisting and leading one another in center time. When the researcher asked her if she liked leading with other students, she replied:

When people say ‘AH! I just can’t get it,’ I say look, it’s a problem that you need to know. You know that cause she taught it; just try. When they don’t know it and they so stressed out that they can’t even think correctly, I helps because they can think correctly. They gonna calm down, because we gonna walk them through the steps together.

Marty and Dani both spoke about the opportunities they have been afforded to lead in Ms. Kelly’s classroom. Marty indicated that he acts as the teacher by going over content step by step when someone doesn’t understand or a student had been absent. When speaking with Dani about her experience she stated:

Sometimes we break into groups. The groups switch. We get to break into groups and leaders switch. Sometimes I get to be the leader, like at Expo. For Expo we get to have leaders and then we have different groups with different leaders. Ms. Kelly tries to not let the same people always be leaders. But we all have parts in the group. You might be the leader, or the material manager, or go to the teacher with questions.
The researcher asked Dani what made a good leader:

A person that is responsible and will hear everyone out and take ideas. If you're a leader it doesn’t mean she picked you because you have all the ideas. I could be the leader and Quincy might have good ideas. I’m artistic and Cheyenne is not, Ms. Kelly knows this. So, I can show Cheyenne different ways to work things out. Being a leader doesn’t mean you are in charge of everything, it means you are to lead a little and let everyone butt in. A leader has responsibility and manners to let others butt in.

The researcher sought to understand why Ms. Kelly would allow Marty to step in and lead and act as the teacher. Marty provided that he has leadership. “If someone doesn’t understand or someone wasn’t here I help by going over stuff step by step,” stated Marty. Marty also concurred with Dani that a leader should have manners and be respectful.

Student-led conferences are another way Ms. Kelly and Ms. Martin have set students up to lead. "We found the [student-led] conferences most beneficial,” said Ms. Kelly. "From a teacher's perspective, we were able to reinforce real-world skills. Allowing students to take the lead and review their strengths and weaknesses with one another gave them the confidence to run their own conference,” explained Ms. Martin. Students seconded that notion when they reflected back over the conference.

Dani was more than willing to share her motivating experience:

Well, we found out we were going to do the student led conference. We all got excited because we were like “We’re gonna be in charge we can explain it our way!” Whenever the teacher does it it’s not that fun. Cause if you're doing it you're explaining it and breaking it down for them. If the teacher does it you just sit there quietly. So, when we did it we came in and we had stuff laid out on our desk. We had our binders with our
math and reading tests in it. We had our scores and goal charts in it to explain. Then we walked our parents around the room to different areas that had certain things like posters and projects. Then we took them to the back of the room to look at our goal setting board and we explained the math and reading and showed where we are in our goals. I liked to be in charge and word things my way. If the teacher was in charge she could have worded things her way like if she showed our behavior chart and there was something bad we could explain it our way. If it’s the teacher's way it would be through her eyes and like if it was a bad day she might not have known and if we explain we can explain it and break it down. We also can explain specifically why our test scores went up or why the dropped. I just liked taking charge. At the end I was able to introduce my mom to the teacher and let them talk.

Akeem and Marty echoed how the experience motivated and engaged them. Marty clarified the experience for the researcher:

It was the opposite of the teacher and parent conference. At first I was nervous and then I pulled out my binder. It was kind of like..and then I showed her all the stuff we did and all the stuff we had worked on, some of our tests; reading and math. I was proud cause my momma, she said, ‘Good job!’” when she saw it.

The researcher probed Amos if he enjoyed leading the student-led conference and being in charge:

Yes, my parents were happy and proud of me because I be doing my work and not making bad choices. When I tell my parents about me it’s more powerful than when the teachers do, so parents know what kids need to work on and what they don’t need to work on.
**Research Question 2:**

How does choice impact student motivation and engagement?

When answering this question, one must ask, “What choices are students offered?”

Students tend to perform their best work when they feel in control with the decisions that are being made in the classroom. During the initial interviews both teachers clearly labeled using what they knew about their learners to be able to provide authentic choices to their students. One of the simplest ways to introduce choice in the classroom is through projects. Students can choose how they want to engage with the content to express their learning. As teachers model different learning strategies and tools, learners are acquiring the skills to know which tools are appropriate for different tasks and how to use them effectively. As students take ownership of strategies, they are able to choose the appropriate tools and resources that support student learning. Another choice that allows students to feel in control is that of collaborative groups. Each student interviewed stated that his or her teacher intentionally offered this opportunity, but it was their choice on whether they acted upon it or not. Students who may not completely understand a concept can benefit from sharing and discussing ideas with others. When learners have a choice in what they are learning, especially if it is something they feel passionately about or are interested in; teachers and observers can see and hear the engagement.

**Theme 3: Choice of Projects**

As Prins (2009) points out, it can be very difficult to cover the necessary content in a completely student choice driven classroom. To combat this, Ms. Kelly and Ms. Martin both agree that providing project constraints while still allowing choices of materials keeps students motivated and engaged. Ms. Martin also suggested limiting the choices younger students make so that they do not feel overwhelmed. Ms. Kelly offered that when students are doing the
thinking, having a productive struggle, and making choices about hands on projects they make better connections to the content than three days of instruction.

Jamar noted his motivation and engagement of projects by describing his experience:

I like projects! You see those pizzas over there? We made those! It was a project called fraction pizzas. We tried to have slices of pizza and we made them into fractions with equivalent parts and we had places that weren’t equivalent. We got to pick pepperonis, sausage, anchovies, and bacon. And we could pick our pizza to be eighths, fourths, or halves. I picked eighths because I’m eight. Some people picked halves because that was easy.

Lesa was also quick to provide her thoughts on projects. She labeled that the projects that they do are hard, but they love working on them. Lisa informed the researcher, “We built stuff that our astronauts could not pop out of. We used straws and Popsicle sticks and kept testing it. We did stuff that we created. Like our minds, like any ideas that came from our minds we could choose to create it.”

**Theme 4: Choice of Strategies**

Every student learns differently, it is critical that we focus more on the student than the content. The power of choice provides students the opportunity to choose how they learn and interact with the material. One way to allow student choice in how they engage in their own learning is through the use of strategies. By regularly exposing students to different learning strategies and offering choices in how they are learning, teachers are giving learners insight into their own metacognition as well as helping them to become their own learning advocates.

Ms. Martin was observed moving into a model of her thinking. Before she began the model 9 out of 11 students were observed pulling out whiteboards to mimic the teachers thinking
with out prompting. When debriefing with the teacher the researcher brought this evidence to her attention. Ms. Martin responded:

I have taught students to ask questions and advocate for themselves. They know that the whiteboards are a tool. They know what is appropriate to advocate for. I have modeled different thinking tools for the students. Students are aware that fraction circles are a tool for learning. They know that they can get up, go get them, and use them as needed throughout the class.

A similar situation happened in Ms. Kelly’s room. Ms. Kelly’s class was observed discussing how they knew what operation to use for converting pounds to ounces. As she saw that students were struggling, she encouraged them to problem solve. It was apparent students had practiced different strategies and were perceived making a choice of what worked best for them as a learner. Students were seen offering problem-solving advice to other students. Some students got up and moved to work with partners, some got out highlighters to label parts of their paper, and some moved to check in with the teacher.

Another strategy that both teachers employ is affording choice in student learning centers. Ms. Martin was observed instructing students of their choices:

You have independent work, fraction strips to cut out to use for the rest of the time we do fractions, and either Splash Math, Multiplication.com, MobyMax, FrontRow, or XtraMath. You need to complete the first 2 in any order and then use your computers for interactive math. If your computer dies you have flashcards to work on based on your progress monitoring goals.

The researcher engaged Ms. Martin in why she offered the must do and may do in any order. She explained:
This ensures the work gets done. If the students feel like they have a say they feel like they are in control. For some students picking things they like better first instead of being forced to do what they don’t like keep them from being hostile. Just like as an adult, you don’t have to do things in a particular order. When I am cleaning my house, I get to choose where I want to start and how I want to clean the house.

When interviewed, students from these classes concurred with their teachers. Alonso shared that he enjoys having a choice in centers, “Like in the spelling center she gives us a choice. On grammar you get a choice of 2 out of 4 things of what you want to do.” Dani stated, “She’ll give us decision about reading, decisions about our laptop, she’ll give decisions about math games. She just gives us multiple decisions that we can choose from and she doesn’t have to lead the path by telling us what to do all day.”

**Theme 5: Choice of Small Groups/Partners**

To consolidate student understanding of the content, students’ need opportunities to problem solve, discuss, negotiate, and think with their peers. Collaborative learning opportunities, such as peer discussions, provide a venue for learners to practice and apply their learning. Empowering students to advocate for a thinking partner builds collaborative and safe learning environment.

When debriefing the first observation with Ms. Kelly, the researcher asked for evidence that her students were motivated and engaged. One of the pieces that Ms. Kelly expanded on was partner conversation. Ms. Kelly use to intentionally build partner conversations into the lesson. As the year progressed she still used them intentionally, but students began choosing to work with partners as a way to engage with the content deeper. Ms. Martin and her students reiterated these ideas. Lesa explained how partner choice impacts she and her fellow classmates:
Me and my friend are currently working together in centers. We’ve gotten to know each other a whole lot and we work better a whole lot. She helps me with one problem that I don't know and I help her with one problem that she don’t know. She gots my back. If I say something wrong she will say the correct thing then she steps back and lets me continue.

Jamar reflected on his thoughts of partner choice:

When it’s center time we like being partners in math because some of the assignments are partner assignments and Ms. Montebello either puts us with the table or we choose. We like to work out the problems and then share it out with partners. Me and my friend Zev, he’s great at reading. We like to take turns, he’ll read a paragraph and then I read a paragraph. We like reading that way to each other.

**Research Question 3:**

How does goal setting impact student motivation and engagement?

When analyzing how goal setting impacts motivation and engagement, one must examine the types of goals students want to set and the process they use to achieve them. By knowing what learners want to achieve, they know what they have to concentrate on and improve.

Teachers were observed providing occasions for students to set their own academic and behavior goals. Each student interviewed expressed focusing on short-term goals and how that would impact their future. Purposeful goal setting gives students a long-term vision and short-term motivation. Sharp, clearly defined goals that students can visualize and measure allows them to take pride in accomplishing these goals. Learners can see their progress in short-term goals in what might have seemed like a long drawn out process.
All students interviewed said that they set academic goals in reading and math. All 3rd graders and one 5th grader talked about setting behavioral goals. The researcher asked Marty what he used to set his goals. He sheepishly responded, “No talking to Quincy, Jackson, Dullah, or Selvin.” When inquiring why that is a behavior goal for him he let the researcher know that talking would get him in trouble and he needed to focus. Ms. Martin’s class was observed reflecting on their behavior from the day before. Their conversation focused on the prior days behavior strengths and weaknesses. After having the opportunity to give suggestions for their behavior goal they voted on their focus of the day.

**Theme 6: Short Term Goals**

Ms. Kelly determined that focusing on too many goals becomes very overwhelming for her students. The students in her classroom set a goal for reading and a goal for math and then focus on bi-weekly progress monitoring. Amos contributed how goal setting has impacted him:

> We use a little chart and we have our own little binders that we chart our tests in. We set goals for how much we want to get more on the next one that we did the last time. Ms. Kelly always says we can choose our own goal or try to get 2 more right. Goal setting helps me.. like think of like what I could do to help stay on track and think about that goal. Like basketball. I just think about playing basketball. Because my mom says if I have bad grades I can’t play basketball anymore or I can’t play sports. Yeah. I focus on right now so I don’t fall behind.

Dani expressed the process and her thoughts:

> We use a piece of paper, it’s like just a chart and we chart out our goals and we see what our last goal is and if we achieved it. If we don’t meet our goal, we should put the same goal again. We keep up with it in our binders. It motivates me to reach my goals so I can
feel that warmth in my body and I can be like “Yeah, I got that. I can raise it up now.” It’s kind of like the pacer test in a way. When you reach a certain thing people are like “You can do it!” Like Chris just beat the school record. He went 117. Like it just makes me want to do it because it gives you something to be like “yeah, I did that!” It’s really hard to keep a long-term goal. Mine is to keep an A/B average. It’s just harder, it’s a whole year process. With the week goal, you do it, take a break from that and set another one. The yearlong is the same one and you have to be precise until the end of the year. It’s more hard work.

Lesa shared with the researcher that she enjoyed tracking her goal in her binder and that goal setting motivated her. Lesa stated, “It helps me want to be stronger and I want to be bigger than my goal and higher than what it’s at.”

**Discussion**

Three fundamental questions framed this research:

1) How does voice impact student motivation and engagement?

2) How does choice impact student motivation and engagement?

3) How does goal-setting impact student motivation and engagement?

The theoretical framework derived from the interviews and observations revealed the following characteristics:

- **Learner Profiles:** Learning profiles gave teachers an insider’s perspective of each of their learners as an individuals. This knowledge allowed the teachers to identify student strengths and gap areas, motivation and goals, learning styles, and other personal information that supported students in their education.
• Partnership to Leadership: Educators modeled a variety of instructional and management practices in the classroom that encourages students to develop a sense of responsibility. When learners had regular opportunities to advocate for themselves and lead in the classroom, they felt that they were contributing to something bigger than themselves.

• Choice of Projects: Teachers provided choices in the decision-making and problem solving process. This freedom allowed students to engage in and express content allowing students to have a purpose in what they are learning.

• Choice of Strategies: Students acquired strategies to aid in their thinking to become self-directed and to self-regulate. Exposure to strategies allowed learners to choose the appropriate tool and resource to meet the task at hand.

• Choice of Small Groups/Partners: Teachers must gradually transfer responsibility for learning from teacher to student, providing supports along the way. One of those supports is a thinking partner. The choice of peer collaboration allowed students to practice their understandings.

• Short-Term Goal Setting: Short-term goals provided students with a way to quickly see and feel success. These manageable goals lead students in the process of achieving something larger.
Summary

Motivation and engagement is directly correlated to whether or not learners have opportunities to be autonomous. Themes in this qualitative case study provided a lens for how teachers perceived motivation and engagement and an understanding of how students experienced it. Giving students a voice, providing choices, and leading students to set goals allows learners to feel that they have control or ownership over their learning.

The multiple sources of data collected in an urban elementary school provided a lens to recognize teacher practices and strategies that motivate and engage students. This understanding provides an avenue for learners to now become partners in their education. Chapter 4 described the finding from interviews and observations and the subsequent themes derived. The research questions have been analyzed using the grounded theory and will be used in the next chapter to determine the conclusions and broader theoretical issues in relation to this qualitative study. The following chapter will present the conclusions of this data.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to construct a theoretical framework based on interviews and observations of teachers and students in an urban elementary school. The theory developed provides an explanation of effective practices of voice, choice, and goal setting. The theoretical framework revealed the following characteristics:

- **Learner Profiles:** Learning profiles gave teachers an insider’s perspective of each of their learners as an individuals. This knowledge allowed the teachers to identify student strengths and gap areas, motivation and goals, learning styles, and other personal information that supported students in their education.

- **Partnership to Leadership:** Educators modeled a variety of instructional and management practices in the classroom that encourages students to develop a sense of responsibility. When learners had regular opportunities to advocate for themselves and lead in the classroom, they felt that they were contributing to something bigger than themselves.

- **Choice of Projects:** Teachers provided choices in the decision-making and problem solving process. This freedom allowed students to engage in and express content allowing students to have a purpose in what they are learning.

- **Choice of Strategies:** Students acquired strategies to aid in their thinking to become self-directed and to self-regulate. Exposure to strategies allowed learners to choose the appropriate tool and resource to meet the task at hand.

- **Choice of Small Groups/Partners:** Teachers must gradually transfer responsibility for learning from teacher to student, providing supports along the way. One of those
supports is a thinking partner. The choice of peer collaboration allowed students to practice their understandings.

- Short-Term Goal Setting: Short-term goals provided students with a way to quickly see and feel success. These manageable goals lead students in the process of achieving something larger.

**Broader Theoretical Issues**

This study will be used to examine how voice, choice, and goal setting can be used to impact student motivation and engagement. Teachers were able to label the attributes of a motivated and engaged student and broad strategies that they utilized in the classroom to support those characteristics. The teacher participants were not always cognizant or aware that they were providing specific strategies to increase voice, choice, and goal setting. Therefore, it was important that the students were able to express how the specific strategies and environment promoted them to feel autonomous in their education and to be motivated and engaged in their classrooms. By identifying the specific strategies and characteristics, motivation and engagement can be increased.

**Implications**

The qualitative study focused on how to increase student motivation and engagement through voice, choice, and goal setting. The implications of said research provided an understanding of the specific strategies that can be imparted in a classroom to allow students to become owners of their learning. The study has added to the limited empirical research on how specific voice, choice, and goal setting strategies can impact student motivation and engagement. Data obtained from the interviews and observations have implications for various stakeholders in
education including policymakers, administrators, and teachers. The implications of this case study will increase motivation and engagement not just in an urban setting, but also in all schools.

**For Policymakers**

According to the results of this study, providing specific voice, choice and goal setting strategies increases student motivation and engagement. Therefore, embedding these strategies into teachers’ practices into all schools should be considered when developing educational policy. Job-embedded professional development can provide the necessary understanding to support teachers in their new learning and application of the strategies. Support is necessary to ensure teachers receive the assistance required to insert the strategies into their practices.

**For Administrators**

Based on the data gathered, the specific strategies and characteristics of voice, choice, and goal setting impacted student motivation and engagement. Therefore, it is critical that administrators become active participants in the development and delivery of the strategies in their buildings. As administrators become the lead learners in their building, teachers are more apt to grow in their own professional development and support others through the process.

**For Teachers**

Through the data analysis of this study, it is evident that specific strategies of voice, choice, and goal setting impact student motivation and engagement. By incorporating the strategies into their practices, students are directly influenced. As teachers develop their craft of incorporating voice, choice, and goal setting, they will move from the keeper of knowledge to a facilitator of learning. Now is the time to start engagement and promote motivation and ownership.
**Recommendation for Future Research**

This was a small case study, therefore it may not be possible to generalize the findings to larger institutions with larger populations. Efforts to replicate the research in the future can benefit from including a larger population across a broader grade span. It is also unknown if the results will be as effective with a different socio-economic demographic. Finally, the teachers and students were perceived to have strong relationships. It remains unclear how these specific strategies would impact student motivation and engagement in classrooms that do not have strong teacher/student relationships.

**Summary**

This study has examined how specific voice, choice, and goal setting strategies impacts motivation and engagement. Partnership that leads to leadership and goal setting surfaced to be the most important theme identified in the study. The specific strategies as well as a strong student teacher relationship influenced autonomy and classroom environments. Due to the identified themes as well as characteristics, greater motivation and engagement occurred.
REFERENCES


Diplomas Count. (2013). As graduation rates rise, focus shifts to dropouts. *Education Week*.


*Medecins Sans Frontieres.*


Appendix A

Email to Principal Regarding Research Collection
Mr. (Principal),

As you know, I am currently working on my dissertation for my Ed. D. through Carson-Newman University. For my study, I am examining increasing engagement and motivation. To gather information for this qualitative study, I plan to conduct semi-structured interviews and observations with teachers who attempt to engage and motivate their learners. I will also organize interviews with three students from their respective classrooms. Ultimately, I am looking for teachers that utilize different strategies to excite and inspire their students. This is where I need your assistance. Could you please refer me two teachers that would be willing to discuss these aspects with me? These interviews will be conducted individually, will be confidential, and will last approximately 30 minutes. I’d like to conduct interviews as soon as possible. Please let me know at your earliest convenience who you think would be viable candidates.

Thanks,

Rebecca Curtis
Appendix B

Email to Teachers Regarding Research Collection
Dear (Teacher),

I hope you are doing well. I wanted to reach out to you and ask if you would participate in the data collection phase of my dissertation through Carson- Newman University. Mr. (Principal) identified you as someone who has demonstrated engaging and motivating strategies in your classroom. I am examining how voice, choice, and goal-setting impact these aspects. Your participation would require an initial interview, 2 classroom observations and 2 debriefing sessions. I would also like to interview and debrief with three of your students. If you are willing to participate, please let me know a date and time that we can sit down together. I appreciate your time and consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Thanks,

Rebecca Curtis
Appendix C

Research Consent Form: Teacher and Student
TITLE OF STUDY
Increasing Motivation and Engagement

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Rebecca Curtis
Educational Leadership
(***)-***-****
Rebecca.curtis@knoxschools.org

PURPOSE OF STUDY
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of promoting student voice, choice, and goal setting in a classroom on student motivation and engagement in learning.

STUDY PROCEDURES
Teachers and students will be asked to participate in:

• Initial Teacher Interview- 30 minutes- 1 hour
• Initial Student Interview- 15 – 20 minutes
• Classroom Observations- Two observations
• Two Post- Observation Teacher Interview- 30 minutes
• Two Post-Observation Student Interview- 15- 20 minutes

The interviews will be audio-taped.

BENEFITS
There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, we hope that the information obtained from this study may:

• Inform and label teacher practices and strategies that engage and motivate students
• Allow students to become partners in their education

CONFIDENTIALITY
Your responses in the interviews and observations will be anonymous. For the purposes of this research study, your comments will not be anonymous. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher.

**You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.**

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the Primary Investigator, please contact the Institutional Review Board at (865) 354-3000, ext. 4822.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

**CONSENT**

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature ___________________ Date __________
Investigator's signature ___________________ Date __________
INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Increasing Motivation and Engagement
Principal Investigator: Rebecca Curtis
Sponsor: Carson-Newman University

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Rebecca Curtis and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Program at Carson-Newman University. I am asking for your permission to include your student in my research. This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why your student is being invited to participate. It will also describe what your student will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that your student may have while participating. I encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to allow your student to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

- PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND
The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of promoting student voice, choice, and goal setting in a classroom on student motivation and engagement in learning.

- PROCEDURES
This study will include an interview with your student to determine how their teacher provides them with an opportunity to use their voice, make choices in class, and set academic goals they want to reach. I will then observe the classroom to see if the teacher provides these opportunities. This study will not require your child to do anything above and beyond what they would be doing in class anyway. After the observation, I would interview your student again to determine if they were engaged and motivated. If you choose not to allow your child to participate, s/he will remain in their classroom, but they will not be interviewed and copies of their student work will not be analyzed.

Your child’s classroom will be observed two times in the next few weeks. The classroom teacher will teach lessons as normal. It is estimated that the research will take up to 5 hours to complete.

- RISKS/DISCOMFORTS
Your child may feel uncomfortable being interviewed, but students are familiar with me as I am a presence in their school life. You are able to remove your student from the study at any time and your child will continue to receive quality instruction in this classroom.

- EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY
Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your student’s research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this
study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Your student’s name will not be used in any written reports or publications, which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is complete and then destroyed.

- BENEFITS
There will be no direct benefit to your student from participating in this study. However, the information gained from this research may help education professionals better understand how to continue to motivate and engage students in their academics.

- QUESTIONS
If you have any questions or concerns about participation in this study, please contact me, the researcher or (Principal), Principal at ***-****, or my advisor, Dr. Gonzales at mgonzales@cn.edu

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT
I have read this form and decided that my student will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I will discuss this research study with my student and explain the procedures that will take place. I understand I can withdraw my student at any time.

Printed Name of Child

Printed Name of Parent/Guardian  Signature of Parent/Guardian  Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent  Date
Appendix D

Email to Teachers Regarding Transcription
Dear (Teacher),

Thank you again for agreeing to allow me to interview and observe you and your students. I have shared a Google Drive folder that includes the transcription and summary of our interview and debriefs. I wanted to provide you with an opportunity to review your answers to see if there is anything you would like to be added or taken off of the record. As we discussed previously, all identifiable information will be deleted/changed from the final dissertation. If you have any questions, please contact me.

If I do not hear back from you with specific items you would like to revise, I will use the information as is in the final two chapters of the dissertation.

Thanks,

Rebecca Curtis
VITA

Rebecca Curtis currently resides in Knoxville, TN. She completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts at Tennessee Technological University in Art Education. She also completed her Master of Library Media and Informational Services at Trevecca Nazarene University. After serving in the profession for several years, she returned to higher education and earned an Educational Specialist Degree from Lincoln-Memorial University. She is currently serving as an instructional coach for Knox County Schools and is pursuing an Ed. D. in Educational Leadership: Administrative Leadership from Carson-Newman University. Upon completion of her studies, she will continue to work with educational leaders and educators to continue to develop environments and strategies conducive to personalized learning.