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Tapping the Voices of Learners for Authentic Student Engagement

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Tapping the Voices of Learners for Authentic Student Engagement

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice of the decline in student engagement from the perceptions of secondary school learners as they proceed throughout their educational experience. According to researchers, learners who are engaged—meaning those who are committed and connected in active relationships with teachers, other learners, the learning environment, learning interests and ideas, the curriculum, and learning goals, are more likely to enjoy and be in control of their own learning [student agency]. This study is significant because of its potential to provide new understandings of the problem of a decline in student engagement from the perceptions of learners themselves.

Therefore, this study qualitatively explored a purposeful sample of secondary school learners' perceptions regarding the phenomenon of student engagement during their secondary school experience. The purpose of a phenomenological qualitative research approach is to understand and describe the essence of some phenomenon by capturing the common experience of the phenomenon among a group of research participants. Subsequently, meaning can be constructed out of the common experience of the group. By listening to the voices of learners, a greater understanding could be developed for confronting the life-altering concern of a lack of student engagement in learning during the secondary school experience.

Since researchers have found student engagement in school can transfer to academic, emotional, economic, and social success in school, college, career, and life, understanding what personally engages learners holds significant weight for all students. Gaining a clearer picture in the local context of what engages secondary students from the perceptions of learners could provide a deeper understanding for establishing access to personalized student learning environments, experiences, and opportunities.

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I am indebted to my wife, Paula, for her ongoing encouragement, help, perseverance, and support through my three years of learning, researching, and writing.

I am indebted to my professors in the University of Arkansas Graduate School of Education for adopting the signature pedagogy of identifying and framing a local problem of practice as the basis of study for the doctoral program. Without such a framework and the effective training of these scholars in expanding my thinking and developing my research study skills, I would not have been able to understand sufficiently a local problem of practice. The expectation of the professors for our cohort to rise to a level of scholarly research and to commit to the habits of heart, hands, and mind of a practitioner scholar, will benefit my educational leadership throughout my remaining years of service. The rigor, relevance, and relationships our professors provided throughout the doctoral cohort's coursework and subsequent dissertation hours were outstanding.

I am also indebted to the secondary school student learners of this school district for their willingness to serve as research participants in this study. I greatly appreciate their commitment of time to share and make sense of their lived experiences of engagement. What began for each student learner as an invitation to interview as a possible research candidate, followed by their own and their parents' consent to participate in a series of individual and focus group interviews, ensued by their commitment of time for collecting their perceived experiences of engagement based on the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C), and lastly, member-checking their transcribed interview data for authenticity, resulted in a body of evidence which I am hopeful will be their legacy for helping understand and remedy the local problem of practice of a lack of engagement among secondary school student learners.

Dedication

This dissertation in practice study is dedicated to the community committed to learning at the research context school district. From our school board, to the superintendents, to my fellow principals, and finally, to the collaborative, hardworking, hopeful, innovative, inquiring, and loving teachers of our school district, I dedicate this study to you for your desire to be the best possible influence on our student learners. Particularly, I thank the teachers and staff at the junior high for their unwavering support and encouragement to undertake this study for the high purpose of student success. Lastly and most importantly, I dedicate this study to our district's student learners as well as to student learners throughout our nation and around the world, hopeful the voices of learners will be recognized as significant cultural change agents in schools.

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Chapter One Introduction

Introduction

“Students need a voice, not a survey,” said one national student engagement study participant (as cited in Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). The process of sense making and meaning of what engages secondary learners in their educational experience requires going beyond the surface of things (Ainley, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2006; Eccles, 2004; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Robinson, 2009 & 2010; Watkins, 2015 & 2016; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2013). Just as natural resources are not just lying around, but require a process of excavation, human resources [student voice] similarly must be mined to draw out the riches of understanding and meaning for what engages learners in school (Guba & Lincoln, 1985 & 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Robinson, 2010; VanMenan, 1990). Since learning is an innately personal process (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Clarke, 2013; Rickabaugh, 2013, 2014; Washor, 2014; Watkins, 2009 & 2012), understanding the factors which facilitate the personal engagement of learners at the classroom, school, family, and community levels could enhance the way learning is experienced by students.

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice of the decline in student engagement from the perceptions of secondary school learners as they proceeded throughout their educational experience. According to researchers, learners who are engaged—meaning those who are committed and connected in active relationships with their teachers, other learners, their learning environment, and their learning interests, are more likely to enjoy and be in control of their learning [student agency] (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Reschly, Heubner, Appleton, & Antaramian, 2008; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Rickabaugh, 2012; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

Therefore, this study qualitatively explored a purposeful sample of secondary school learners' perceptions regarding the phenomenon of student engagement during their secondary school experience. By engaging secondary school learners in the process of meta-cognition with a multi-dimensional and socio-ecological view of engagement, educational practitioners, leaders, and policy actors could become open to valuing and responding to their voices as an authentic contribution for school improvement (Cook-Sather, 2006; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003; Walker & Greene, 2009; Yazzie-Mintz, 2009 & 2010; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2013).

This study is significant because of its potential to provide new ideas and conceptualizations of the problem of the decline in student engagement of secondary school learners from the perceptions of learners themselves (Cook-Sather, 2006; Prusha, 2012; VanSteenkiste & Sheldon, 2006; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2013). Also, since researchers have found student engagement in school can transfer to academic, emotional, economic, and social success in school, college, career, and life (Blumenfeld, Modell, Bartko, Secada, Fredricks, Friedel, & Parks, 2005; Conley & French, 2014; Diagostino & Olsen, 2015; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015; Marzano & Pickering, 2011; Zimmerman, 2012), understanding what personally engages learners bears significant weight for all students. Gaining a clearer picture in the local context of what engages secondary students from the perceptions of learners could provide a deeper understanding for establishing access to personalized student learning experiences (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Watkins, 2015 & 2016).

My hope for this study is to contribute new understandings of student engagement from the perceptions of secondary learners to inform strategic planning decisions of the district and its secondary schools. By exploring and responding to the perceptions of learners for what

personally engages them in school, district and school leaders could enact school improvement plans built on the research connections between student engagement and positive academic, cognitive, emotional, and social school outcomes (Cook-Sather, 2006; Yazzie-Mintz, 2009 & 2010; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). I also hope this study encourages others to regard the voices of learners as essential and trustworthy for conducting effective educational research. By listening to learners, a greater understanding of the phenomenon of student engagement could be gained to confront and solve the life-altering concern of the decline in student engagement during the secondary school experience.

Problem Statement

The problem of practice of the decline in student engagement during the secondary school experience has a significant impact on the development of student agency for self-determining success in school and life pathway readiness (Dagrosa Harris, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Rickabaugh, 2012). Researchers have traditionally measured student engagement of learners through behavioral lenses, those who receive and maintain good grades and excellent school attendance, experience an absence of school discipline issues, express positive performance on standardized assessments, persist to graduation, and progress on to post-secondary school education or training opportunities (Finn, 1989; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Stout & Christenson, 2009). However, emerging conceptualizations of student engagement reveal disaffection at the secondary school level is well-documented even among those who exhibit success as measured by traditional student engagement indicators (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Sparks, 2013; Ungar, 2011; Yazzie-Mintz; 2010 & 2012). Researchers contend learners are not on “automatic pilot” (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 436) when it comes to engagement in school;

that appropriate challenges, meaningful relationships, emotional connections, significant learning experiences, and interest-based opportunities matter for learners to realize their potential (Busteed, 2013; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; EdVisions, 2014; EdWeek, 2014; Gallup, 2014; Gibson & Barr, 2015; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Focus on Instructional and/or Systemic Issue

The emergence of student engagement as a key instructional issue has developed over the last 40 years as researchers have conceptualized engagement as a theoretical construct and phenomenon worthy of educational research (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Wolters & Taylor, 2012). Additionally, researchers' findings of the steady decline in student engagement of learners as they proceed into and throughout their secondary school experiences reveals the construct of student engagement is also a systemic issue (Busteed, 2013; Crotty, 2013; Fredricks et al., 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Newman, 1992; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kinderman, 2008; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2013). According to Newman (1992), "the most immediate and persisting issue for students and teachers is not low achievement, but student disengagement" (p. 2). The construct of student engagement has broad acceptance as an essential instructional and school systems issue for addressing the educational needs of learners (Bohnert, Fredricks, & Randall, 2010; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012).

Copland (2013) wrote about tackling problems of practice which are "important, timely and substantively focused on the process of teaching and learning." Evidence of student engagement serving as such an issue was seen in the recent legislation, the Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA] (2016), formulated by the United States Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2015, as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act of 1965. By inclusion of student engagement in the ESSA, an understanding of the critical connections between student engagement and academic achievement, holistic child and adolescent development, persistence to graduation and post-secondary learning opportunities as well as other positive school outcomes, were further established (Hough, Penner, & Witte, 2016).

As newer understandings of student engagement as the “conceptual glue” have emerged (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 443), student engagement is viewed as a critical instructional issue. Researchers’ contentions that student engagement is more about connecting learners and learning through a complex series of relationships, more than a temporally measured checklist of school processes and activities (Lawson & Lawson, 2013), further reveals the systemic relevance of the construct. By understanding the construct of student engagement as a systemic series of relationships between learners and teachers, the school environment, and other school, family, and community stakeholders (Yazzie-Mintz, 2012), a “socio-ecological” (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 432) pathway to challenging learning opportunities and personalized student learning experiences has materialized.

Is Directly Observable

Two additional dimensions of a genuine problem of practice, “observable” and “actionable,” are intimately related. The problem of practice of the decline in student engagement among secondary school learners embodies by name and definition a phenomenon that is observable and actionable. Prior perceptual data obtained from students via the state required school improvement plan advanced survey/questionnaire (2016), revealed a majority of students experiencing a decline in engagement. A majority of students responded they don’t believe, being successful in school today will help them in their futures; all students are given a

chance to succeed; they can do well in school; their teachers and families think they can do well in school; there is a feeling of belonging in their school; discipline is handled fairly in their school; they like going to their school; their opinions are valued by teachers and administrators; their teachers really care about them; if they have a problem there are teachers who will listen and help; teachers treat them with respect; and they are treated fairly at school.

Examining the perceptual decline in student engagement by listening to the stories and voices of learners through individual and focus group interviews, narrative writing samples, and school observations, revealed a richer view of the lived experiences of the decline in student engagement of secondary school learners (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The intent of conducting my study was to increase our understanding of the decline in student engagement from the perceptions of secondary learners. As individual and focus group interviews were conducted, narrative writing samples obtained, and observations and field notes taken in the local context, observable expressions of the phenomenon were collected (Morgan, 1996; Seidman, 2013).

Is Actionable

An actionable research problem points to a clear goal of the reclaimed and reframed Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate (CPED) Ed.D., "practitioners who will work from theories of action," and whose objectives are to communicate with the intent "of motivating and guiding change with evidence, arguments, and values" (Archbald in Belzer & Ryan, p. 198). Therefore, as engagement and motivation researchers hold widespread agreement that the constructs of engagement and motivation are highly malleable (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012), gaining an understanding of the problem of the decline of student engagement in secondary schools could significantly inform classroom, school, family, and community level policy and practice for

enhancing student engagement in real time. By obtaining the views and perceptions of learners for what they identify as the relevant experiences of the decline in student engagement, what Moustakas (1994) called horizontalization, clearer insight and meaning-making of those experiences can be seen on the horizon (Gilstrap, 2007). Gaining such knowledge for the purpose of designing learner-centered school improvement actions demonstrates the problem of practice is also naturally actionable, meaning as local practitioners we can solve or improve the problem (Bengtson, 2015).

Connects to a Broader Strategy of Improvement

As a practitioner-scholar, I understand acquiring the skills of a steward of the profession are for affecting positive social change (Perry & Imig, 2008). Equipped with the tools of deciphering and designing research for the purpose of debating ineffective educational policy and practice (Perry, 2013), I hope to contribute positively to the lives of learners and their families, a school, district, community, and state by providing a more vibrant and broader conceptualization of student engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2013). By applying the program's signature pedagogy, "the identification and framing of a problem of practice" (Bengtson, 2015); with an eye towards "inquiry as an ongoing way of thinking and being, during and beyond their doctoral studies" (Chan, Heaton, Swidler, & Wunder, 2013, p. 269), my intent to inform strategic planning decisions of the district and its secondary schools.

By exploring the perceptions of learners, district and school leaders could enact school improvement plans built on the research connections between student engagement and positive academic, emotional, and social school outcomes (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). Past and current top-down reform efforts, (ESEA Flexibility Waivers, 2011; ESSA, 2015; No Child Left Behind (NCLB), 2001; Race to the Top competitive grants (RTTT), 2009; Top Ten by 2020 of

MODESE, 2013), have been designed around generalized and standardized indicators of engagement. However, by harnessing the emergent engagement research from the past 40 years, school policy actors could collaborate to enact school improvement steps focused on providing access to personalized educational experiences (Bray and McClaskey, 2015 & 2016; Rickabaugh, 2014 & 2016; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2013; Washor, 2014; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2013; Watkins, 2015).

According to Clarke (2015), learner-centered school improvement will occur when, “students’ personal interests, talents, and aspirations provide a starting point for designing their own pathways toward graduation, work, and college” (p. xiii). By gaining a richer understanding of the construct of student engagement from the perceptions of learners, enhancements towards self-determination, preparedness for college and career readiness, life-long learning, and stimulating “intellectual or practical passion to the next level of schooling and/or work” (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009), could be realized. The parameters for utilization of the research results also extend to supporting policy and practice changes advocated for by the Missouri Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP) and Better Schools for Missouri policy reform efforts with the Missouri State Board of Education, MODESE, and the Missouri State Legislature. I hope to influence policymakers and practitioners on local and state levels to move the focus of school improvement planning on addressing the necessary engagement needs of learners for developing agency for more in-depth learning, academic achievement, and life readiness.

Is High Leverage

According to the school district, an equal emphasis exists on both the individual and the community of learners having academic and affective opportunities which support learners in understanding and valuing themselves, their peers, and the world around them (Harris &

Vidergor, 2015). A stated end goal is for learners to become “happy, useful, and self-supporting citizens of our democracy” (Research School District, 2015). This learner outcome aligns with the strategic goals of the research school district, a commitment to identifying the learning needs of all students and using district resources to provide every child access to creative, challenging, and engaging opportunities which personalize their student learning experience.

The possibility of significantly increasing student engagement in school is an attractive scenario. Positively impacting learners by empowering their development of self-regulation and self-efficacy for student agency towards self-determining life pathways (Eccles & Roeser, 2013; Martin, 2009; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reschly, et. al, 2009; Skinner, et. al, 2008; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Walker & Green, 2009; Watkins, 2009 & 2010), demonstrates the high leverage dimension of this problem of practice. Learners who have developed agency over their learning are more likely to understand, articulate, make progress towards, and celebrate mastery of standards over time (Rickabaugh, 2015; Rickabaugh, 2014). Likewise, Clarke (2015) claimed when schools provide opportunities for students to develop their needs of expressing personal voice, creating individual and group identities, examining options and choosing a path, having the ability to take risks and assess the effects, creating a projected view of self, and exploring and evaluating adult roles, learners are more likely to engage with adults, their peers, their learning, and the life of the school.

Lastly, according to Watkins (2010), attention to student engagement in schools has a positive impact on academic achievement. Watkins reports schools which maintained an “improving one’s competence orientation, in contrast to those with a proving one’s competence orientation,” demonstrated increased engagement with learning as measured on standardized assessments (Watkins, 2010, p. 4). In other words, student engagement enhances and

compliments performance. That student engagement holds such promise for positively impacting affective and academic student needs demonstrates the “high leverage” dimension of this problem of practice.

Research Questions

1. How do secondary school learners describe their perceptions of engagement at school and in the classroom?
2. How do classroom-level factors influence or affect learners’ experiences of engagement?
3. How do school-level factors influence or affect learners’ experiences of engagement?
4. How do family and community-level factors influence or affect learners’ experiences of engagement?

Overview of Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify how learners described their experiences of engagement and to understand the possible factors contributing to student engagement from the voices of learners. By seeking to comprehend learners’ experiences of engagement in a secondary school setting, a significant understanding for how to develop learner-centered environments (conceptual framework) could be enhanced.

In today’s democratically-oriented society and educational setting, where equitable access and programming for personalizing student learning experiences are the stated strategic goals in the local context, the purpose of this research study was to listen to the voices of learners in order to help us think in new and broader ways about how we educate students (Cook-Sather, 2006; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). By incorporating the naturalistic approach of constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), with phenomenological individual and focus group

interviews and narrative writing opportunities, a greater understanding of the phenomenon of student engagement of secondary school learners could be built.

Looking to understand the experiences of learners with a local problem of practice, the selection of 15 participants as a purposeful sample was implemented. To accomplish the goal of collecting qualitatively rich data for constructing meaning out of the lived experience of student engagement, the learners were paired in groups of five and each group was interviewed twice as separate focus groups (Morgan, 1996). In addition, the three interviews series (Seidman, 2013) was conducted with all 15 individual co-researcher participants.

Positionality

I am positioned in several significant relationships in my current problem of practice setting. According to Holmes (2014), positionality describes both “a person’s worldview and the position they have chosen to adopt in relation to a specific research task” (p. 2). Therefore, I understand the importance my worldview bears on my research relationships with learners and their families while conducting this research study. Although my personal worldview is strongly shaped by conservative Midwestern American cultural values, it has also been impacted by diverse educational and life experiences. For example, while the pillar of personal responsibility was erected early on in my youth and solidified throughout adulthood, I have also embraced the importance of community and being my brother’s keeper. Understanding positionality empowers me as a practitioner-scholar to be aware of biases, subjectivity versus objectivity, and limitations.

Researcher's Role

I understand my role as an active, native participant with the problem of practice existed before my role as an inquirer looking to name, frame, and solve the problem of practice. Understanding my dual identities as a native and an inquirer aided me in taking the necessary objective steps to “make the familiar strange” (Heaton & Swidler, as cited in Wunder & Latta, 2012, p. 90). It also helped me prepare for my ongoing professional work “to think, to perform and to act with integrity” (Shulman, 2005). As the head principal and lead learner in my school setting, I play a significant role in building and maintaining an internal culture and climate of honor, professionalism, life-long learning, collegiality, and self-efficacy. I also take the lead in developing a shared vision and managing the complicated process of change.

In my role as the primary research instrument, I used the qualitative methods of individual and focus group interviews and narrative writing sampling within a phenomenological research design. My purpose was to obtain a rich data set from learners about their perceptions of student engagement at the secondary school level. By listening and learning from the voices of learners, I gained a deeper understanding of the construct of student engagement.

Professionally, since July of 2006, I have served as a local public school administrator. From 2006-2009, I served as an assistant principal at a junior high for three years before moving to my current post as lead principal at a different junior high school. During my classroom teaching career, I completed my Masters in Educational Leadership. During my first six years as a school administrator, I acquired my Specialist in Educational Leadership. I spent four years as a classroom teacher, preceded by two years of service as a school bus driver while completing my alternative certification route into education as my second career. My first career was in the field of local Christian church ministry. The researcher's role in professional learning networks

such as Missouri Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP) and Southwest Missouri Association of Secondary School Principals (SWMASSP), has also provided me numerous professional development opportunities.

Assumptions

Several assumptions underlie this dissertation in practice proposal. The first assumption is that a more person-centered approach to schooling is warranted for learners to develop self-determining life pathways (Rogers & Freiberg, 1999; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). This approach begins by inviting learners into the conversation of what makes for an effective school experience (Cook-Sather, 2006; Prusha, 2013). Schools have traditionally ignored the voices of students and learners as valuable resources for school improvement (Cook-Sather, 2006). Teams of educators who are looking to develop learner-centered environments in school over curriculum, standards, or teaching-centered environments in school, must evaluate their own beliefs and practices by engaging with the voices of learners, as well as with scholarly research (Rickabaugh, 2015; Watkins, 2015 & 2016).

The second assumption is that school should be as much about teachers' learning as students' learning (Sarason, 2004). As a community committed to learning, teachers and administrators should demonstrate life-long learning through their active participation in collaboration, action research, and professional development. Educational practitioners and leaders should be continually inquiring and self-reflecting about their practices to meet the needs of learners. This belief assumes acknowledging and questioning the natural forces of constancy (Watkins, 2016) and dynamic conservatism (Schon, 1983) within the school community. According to Herr and Anderson (2014), this dynamic is embedded and largely remains unchallenged due to cultural traditions, norms, and values which keep practitioners imprisoned

with the status quo. In contrast, I assume my pursuit of higher level education is in-line with the thoughts of Shulman (2005),

Professional education is not education for understanding alone; it is preparation for accomplished and responsible practice in the service of others. It is preparation for 'good work.' Professionals must learn abundant amounts of theory and vast bodies of knowledge. They must come to understand in order to act, and they must act in order to serve (p. 53).

A third assumption is the need to engage the whole child if schools are to be a place where learners would prefer to commit their presence. In a compulsory school attendance culture, attempting to engage only the mind and not the emotional and social make-up of learners is a recipe for disaffection of students at school (Crotty, 2013; Furrer, Skinner, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2006; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). A holistic approach to student success means paying significant attention to the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of today's learners.

The final assumption is that one of the most significant purposes of education is for learners to discover their passions so they can find their purpose and contribution in life (Bray & McClaskey, 2015, Robinson, 2009 & 2010). By providing personalized student learning opportunities in school, learners are more likely to enjoy school, discover their potential talents and passions, and go on to live productive, responsible, and sustainable lives. The founding documents of our nation are clear that all people are created equal and should possess the freedom to pursue their personal course of happiness. This right should be promoted and protected in schools by creating more personalized learning environments (Watkins, 2015).

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms, phrases, and accompanying definitions will help provide the intended context and reach of this study, which is to purposefully examine the problem of

practice of the decline in student engagement of secondary school learners as they proceed throughout their educational experience. Additionally, providing and defining a common language of key terms will aide school, district, and community leaders initiate actions which support learners and learning as the primary focus of school. Understanding the key terms will enhance readers' understanding of what problem of practice this study addresses, why this is a problem of practice, and how the researcher is proposing to study and solve the problem of practice.

Engagement: A multi-dimensional combination of cognitive, academic, emotional, social, and behavioral facilitators or relationships which lead to deeper involvement or participation with a phenomenon. Engaged student learners are those who are committed and connected in active relationships with teachers, other learners, the learning environment, learning interests and ideas, the curriculum, and learning goals, and are more likely to enjoy and be in control of their own learning [student agency].

Learner: Learners are students. Learners have the primary responsibility for learning; they drive their learning. For the purpose of this dissertation in practice, learners are children in the midst of the K-12 educational experience and are referred to as students, learners, or student learners within this dissertation in practice.

Standardization: A learning standards or curriculum-centered, content delivery, and performance measurement approach to education, where an agreed upon set of formalized standards exist as the minimum of what students know and can do.

Agency: The learner's emergence of engaging strategically in their school experiences as the primary driver of their learning. Agency embodies a sense of self-efficacy, ownership of learning, and self-determination.

Voice: The learner's expression of feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and directions about a specific involvement, relationship, or phenomenon.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter two provides a literature review of the construct of student engagement, incorporating the foundations of the construct as well as emerging understandings of scholarly and peer-reviewed research. Attention in chapter two was given to the multi-dimensionality of student engagement and its relationship to tandem constructs which impact learners' progress towards becoming self-determining learners for post-secondary learning and life success. Chapter three explains the methodology for this study, laying out in greater detail the initial qualitative presentation from chapter one. The following are explained in chapter three, a specific rationale for the study, data sampling and sources process, data collection procedures, data analysis approach, trustworthiness, and limitations and delimitations. Chapter four presents the findings of this study by telling the story of secondary school learners' lived experience of engagement. Chapter five provides an interpretative analysis of the findings presented in chapter four, discussing conclusions drawn from the knowledge gained in answering the four research questions and suggesting recommendations for a local problem of practice as well as provides implications for theory and future research.

Chapter Two Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice of the decline in student engagement from the perceptions of secondary school learners as they proceeded throughout their educational experience. In my review of the literature, I found numerous research studies and related theories which support student engagement as a pathway to positive outcomes in school. Since engagement is significant for increasing student success, I investigated the different dimensions of student engagement and their ensuing impact on the development of learner agency for self-determining success in school and life pathway readiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Horn & Staker, 2011; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; McCombs & Vakili, 2005; Wolfe & Poon, 2015).

Chapter two includes the literature review search strategy, the literature review, and the conceptual framework. The review of literature included a description and the importance of the separate dimensions of student engagement and the interrelated constructs of motivation and student voice. Also, the review included my investigation of the relationship between engagement and adolescent development. Lastly, the literature review examined the integration of these constructs for their potential benefit towards developing learner agency for self-determining success in school and life pathway readiness.

A crucial first step in seeking to build a valid case for the relevance and importance of a problem of practice is the quest to locate and understand the “credible evidence based on previous research” (Machi & McEvoy, 2013, p. 3) from the academic community. Insightful learning from both online doctoral class opportunities and on-campus seminar weekends with professors and cohort members, including the opportunity of gaining research skills from the

school of education's research librarian, enabled the literature review. Utilizing Ebsco, Proquest, JSTOR, and Google Scholar databases through the University of Arkansas library system, I searched key terms such as "student engagement," "adolescent development," "student motivation," and "student voice."

As resources were located, initial reviews of book table of contents, journal article and dissertation abstracts, and the skimming of section headings, introductory and concluding paragraphs, and reference lists in bibliographies, led to an evaluation of which items would be productive for informing my problem of practice (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2008; Machi & McEvoy, 2013). Journal searches included the fields of education, school administration, and educational psychology.

Table 1
Literature Review Source Information

Types of Sources	Types of Sources
Books: 37	Chapters within Books: 33
Peer-Reviewed Journals: 95	Other Journals: 30
Published Dissertations: 1	
Other (e.g., Electronic, Conference Proceeding): 53	

Review of Literature

The following sections represent the topic areas that were explored to understand further the problem of a decline in student engagement of learners as they proceed throughout their secondary school experience: Overview, engagement, motivation, and voice as well as related theories of adolescent development and motivation.

Overview

In today's educational environment of preparing students to develop agency for continuous learning in career-related or higher education opportunities, sustaining student engagement over time is crucial (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Martin, 2009; Rickabaugh, 2012; Wolfe & Poon, 2015). This is critical since turning students into life-ready learners, those who are self-regulated, self-motivated, and self-determining to work towards their own life goals outside of school, is a foundational purpose of education (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; McCombs, 2012; McCombs & Vakili, 2005; Rickabaugh, 2016; M. Vandeven, Missouri State Commissioner of Education, personal communication, 2016; Zimmerman, 2008). To fulfill this purpose, school, classroom, family, and community environments must exist which provide engaging opportunities for learners to develop such qualities. Educators have a moral obligation and professional responsibility to connect scholarship and theory to policy and practice to provide such environments of engagement (Clarke, 2013; Clarke, DiMartino, Frazier, Fisher, & Smith, 2003; DiMartino & Clarke, 2008; Labaree, 2003; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012; Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006; Sizer, 2013).

To realize this goal, a great need persists to focus in tandem on the constructs of student engagement, motivation, and voice as part of a continuum of learning, rather than addressing these constructs in isolation (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Bray & McClaskey, 2015 & 2016; Christenson et al., 2012; Reigeluth, Beatty, & Myers, 2016; Rickabaugh, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Zimmerman, 2002). In addition, understanding the interrelatedness of these constructs with adolescent development and across multiple ecologies must also be considered (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Mahatmya, Lohman,

Matjasko, and Farb, 2012; Serrat, 2010; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Although research validates the importance of student engagement (Christenson et al., 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris; 2004; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010), motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985 & 2002; Dweck, 2006; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; McCombs, 2012), and student voice (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Conley & French, 2014; Cook-Sather, 2006; Elwood, 2013; Fleming, 2015; Mitra, 2003, 2005, & 2009; Rickabaugh, 2014), it is the interactivity of the constructs which prepares learners for post-secondary college, career, community, and life readiness (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Reigeluth et al., 2016; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

As Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) noted, a “web of causality” (pg. 1) exists when individual educational constructs are interrelated and implemented simultaneously for creating independent and agentic learners (Bandura, 2001). Toshalis and Nakkula (2012), highlighted the significance of such causality when naming the relationship web between motivation, engagement, and voice the “trifecta” (p. 33) of learner-centered learning, concluding “Without motivation, there is no push to learn. Without engagement, there is no way to learn. Without voice, there is no authenticity in the learning” (p. 33).

Engagement

As educational practitioners research how to increase student engagement, a working definition and an understanding of how to measure it will be critical. A review of extant research literature revealed engagement conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct, including affective/psychological, behavioral/academic, and cognitive domains (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Parsons, Newland, & Parsons, 2014). According to researchers, although academically engaged time is important, it is insufficient alone for learners attaining to key educational outcomes (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Instead, learners’ social–

emotional (affective, psychological) and cognitive needs (challenge, deep learning) must also be addressed. In other words, learners are not on “automatic pilot” (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 435), when they attend school; environmental conditions for feeling, acting, thinking, succeeding, and relating matter (Niemi & Ryan, 2009).

Therefore, Parsons’ et al., (2014), following synthesis of the multi-dimensionality of the engagement construct as the A, B, and C’s of student engagement serves as a first step in establishing the working definition.

- Affective engagement: Feelings of identification or belonging, relationships with teachers and peers, experiences of autonomy, and expressions of curiosity and enthusiasm;
- Behavioral engagement: Attendance, classroom participation, question-posing and question-answering, extracurricular involvement, time on task, problems attempted, credits earned toward graduation, homework completion;
- Cognitive engagement: Self-regulation, developing and perseverance with learning goals, meta-cognitive strategies, perceived relevance of schoolwork to future endeavors, meaning-making of the knowledge or skill to be learned (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012).

The multidimensionality of the engagement construct is embedded in multiple measurement tools (Fredricks et al., 2011), such as Yazzie-Mintz’s (2010) High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), resulting in further conceptualized definitions of student engagement. According to Yazzie-Mintz (2010), “engagement can best be understood as a relationship between the student and school community, the student and school adults, the student and peers, the student and instruction, and the student and curriculum” (pg. 1). Another

definition comes from Education Week's (2014) survey results of over 500 site-based educators, revealing teachers' perception of student engagement as learners who exhibit effort and enthusiasm with their learning (cognitive and affective dimensions), positive attendance at school (behavioral dimension), and persistence with schoolwork (cognitive and behavioral dimensions).

Others conceptualize student engagement as the path or bridge which connects motivation with learning and personal development (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Trowler & Trowler 2011). Conley & French (2014), support this assertion stating, "Motivation and engagement are closely related. Motivation is an internal state, while engagement is the manifestation of motivation behaviorally" (pg. 1021). Toshalis & Nakkula (2012) define student engagement as "the range of activities a learner employs to generate—sometimes consciously, other times unconsciously—the interest, focus, and attention required to build new knowledge or skills" (pg. 16). In other words, engagement is the instrument which enables motivation to emerge for active and meaningful learning.

However, according to researchers, a lack of exactness with the definition is problematic for proper theory development and problem-solving in specific contexts (Eccles & Wang, 2012). While acceptance and appreciation of the prevalent conceptualization of engagement as a multi-dimensional construct exists among researchers (Christenson et al., 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013), it also leaves researchers and practitioners falling short of making precise innovations and interventions for the diversity of students served (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). This shortfall in developing, evaluating, and refining engagement innovation and intervention tools is what researchers call the "practice gap" (Christenson et al., 2012, p. 815). Researchers (Christenson et

al., 2012), state there is significant interest for their body of work to be put into practice for establishing the effectiveness of precise engagement-based innovations and interventions.

Additionally, an extant synthesis of 21 engagement measurement tools (Fredricks et al., 2011) bears witness to the accepted multi-dimensionality of the engagement construct, revealing a vast database of questions from the affective, behavioral, and cognitive domains. However, researchers call for future research studies of the engagement construct to include less formulaic and more socio-ecological conceptions for understanding specific contexts (Eccles & Wang, 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). For instance, while researchers contend student engagement has traditionally been explored within a temporal order at the classroom and school levels, new conceptualizations of student engagement as a synergistic and dynamic process over time and across multiple ecologies have now been constructed (Eccles & Wang, 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

These emerging frameworks acknowledge the importance of the multi-dimensional definition of engagement, but also expand it in significant ways (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). According to Lawson and Lawson (2013), student engagement is envisioned as the “conceptual glue” (p. 443), linking sustained student agency over time to relationships and activities across academic, extra-curricular, and out of school ecologies for enhancing their learning experience and personal development (Appleton et al., 2008; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Trowler, 2010). Context and the diversity of individual’s and social groups’ various ecologies can bear heavily upon student engagement in school (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Therefore, building on the call for more nuanced conceptualizations of student engagement (Christenson et al., 2012;

Lawson & Lawson, 2013), a brief review of a transactional view of engagement is now presented.

Transactional view of engagement. The frustration/self-esteem and participation-identification models posited by patriarchal engagement researcher, Jeremy Finn (1989), stated early experiences significantly impact positive student engagement dispositions in school. Consequently, the more a child experiences positive relationships with school adults and contexts early in their school experiences, the more likely they are to identify and participate in school during subsequent years of schooling (Finn, 1989; Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Finn (1989),

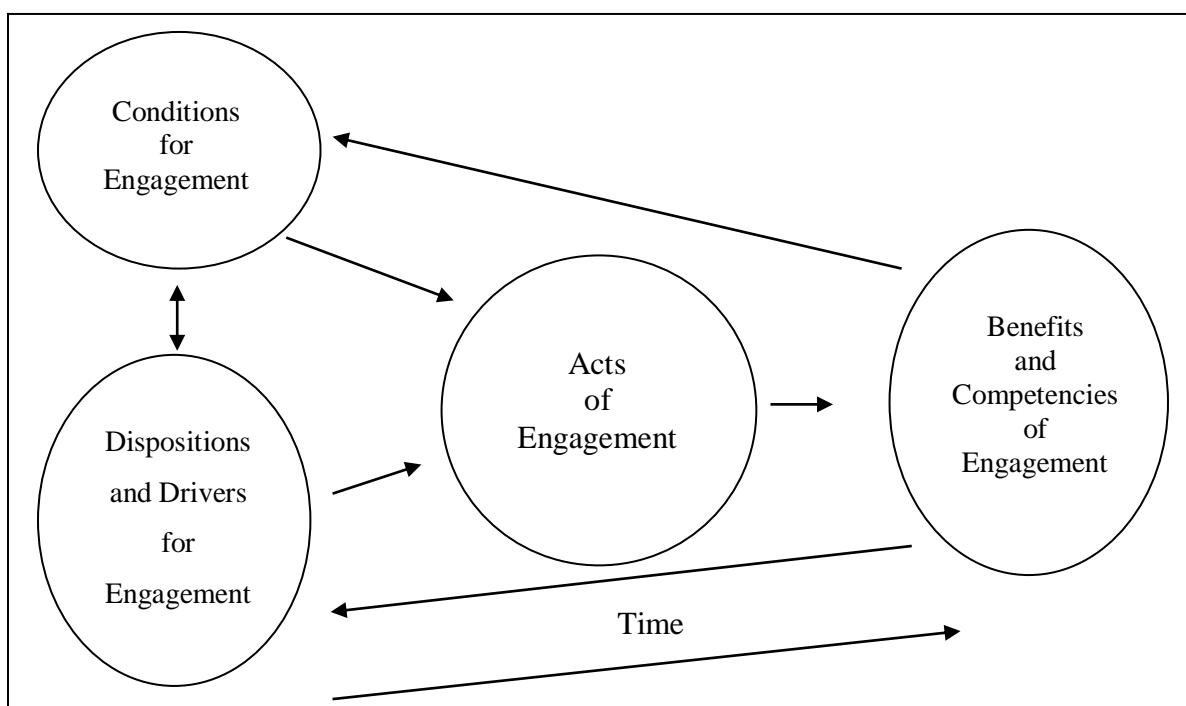


Figure 1. A transactional framework of engagement conceptualizes the dynamic interplay of various social-ecologies, adolescent development, and learner acts of engagement working together towards positive school and societal outcomes, benefits, and competencies over time. Adapted from “New Conceptual Frameworks for Student Engagement Research, Policy, and Practice,” by M.A. Lawson & H.A. Lawson, 2013, *Review of Educational Research*, 83, p. 443. Copyright 2013 by the Review of Educational Research

documented the opposite is equally cyclical, the more a child experienced negative relationships with school adults and contexts early in their school experiences, the more likely they are to experience frustration, low self-esteem, and the eventual rejection of the school environment. Finn (1989), found the influence of learners' relational and experiential attachments in classroom and school environments either heightened or hindered their identification/ participation or frustration/self-esteem with school.

Models of engagement such as Finn's (1989) participation/identification model, are emblematic of temporal order processes of engagement (Christenson et al., 2012). The depiction of such an engagement model follows a context → motivation → engagement → outcomes order, where attachment to the context and motivational processes serve as facilitative precursors of engagement in a linear fashion (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Skinner et al., 2008); with the three primary dimensions of engagement (affective, behavioral, and cognitive), serving as indicators of engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Engagement then mediates the transition from motivational thoughts and feelings to new learning, academic achievement, and other positive adolescent developments (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Fredricks et al., 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

In contrast to such temporal order models of engagement, socio-ecological models of engagement hold to the conception that since learners live their lives across multiple social contexts, engagement should be viewed more as a dynamic transactional process (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Such a transactional model of engagement is depicted in figure 1 (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). According to researchers, as learners are influenced across various social ecologies, such as family, community, school, and out of school youth community groups, a

powerful synergy (condition) emerges for youth engagement (Iwasaki, 2015; Kiefer & Wang, 2016; Lawson, Alameda-Lawson, & Richards, 2016; McFarland, Moody, Diehl, Smith, & Thomas, 2014).

Analogous synergistic conceptualizations of student engagement account for interactive relationships between multiple variables; such as students' prior experiences of engagement over time and across diverse social-ecology contexts, rather than more generalized one size fits all engagement formulas (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Such synergistic variables serve as valuable drivers and dispositions for further student acts of engagement in a transactional model of engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013); while also supporting learner-centered approaches to educating our youth [conceptual framework] (APA, 1997; McCombs, 2003; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

It is this dynamic combination of socio-ecological forces and dispositions and drivers of engagement which serve as valuable precursors for future students acts of engagement and the attainment of benefits and competencies of engagement, such as deep learning and academic engagement in school (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012; Eccles & Wang, 2012). Researchers have noted such positive sequences of engagement as "virtuous cycles" (Green et al., 2012, p. 1119) and "rich-get-richer" (Appleton et al., 2008, p. 374) phenomena. Significantly, this view is congruent with the extant literature on student engagement that engagement is highly malleable; that it is improvable through positive relationships, environments, and educational practices (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Understanding the precursory and malleable nature of engagement holds powerful implications for educational researchers', practitioners', policy-actors', and policy-makers' future courses of educational practice, research, and policy-making for achieving positive student

and societal outcomes (Eccles & Wang, 2012; Lee, 2012; Lawson, 2010). Likewise, such research findings suggest if learners are sufficiently engaged and encouraged relationally by teachers and other vital adults across various social-ecologies, their engaging behaviors can gain momentum and increase over time, resulting in greater learner agency for self-determining success in school and life pathway readiness (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Klem & Connell, 2004; Park et al., 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Zimmer-Gemback, Chipuer, Hanisch, Creed, & McGregor, 2006; Zyngier, 2008).

Since learners experience life across several social-ecologies, the transactional model of engagement views contextual support for engagement a priority, which is similar to a traditional, more linear view of engagement. However, in a socio-ecological conceptualization of engagement, a contrasting feature is the personalized ordering of variables based upon particular individual or group needs (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). For one person or group the effective order might be engagement → motivation → outcomes, based upon personal or social differences among individuals and groups (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). For example, researchers (Busey & Russell, 2016; Wylie & Hodgen, 2012) have found minorities or gender-based subgroup populations often require engagement before motivation, due to prior classroom or school environments not experienced as culturally congruent to their identities. For these learners, active participation in culturally responsive classroom and school contexts are the priority (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). These learners' continuum of engagement might include the activation of internal motivational processes subsequent or simultaneous to external participation in the context (Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

An additional interacting relationship in the transactional model of engagement is the impact of social ecologies upon the process of human development (De Laet et al., 2016; Engles

et al., 2016). According to Mahatmya et al., (2012), during the period of adolescent development student acts of engagement help facilitate positive developmental benefits such as intellectual capacity, academic achievement, social competencies, and maturation of relationships. Additionally, Mahatmya et al., (2012) posit with other researchers (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Finn, 1989; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012), the importance of the reciprocal relationship between student acts of engagement and adolescent development over time. According to Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000), humans develop dynamically over time by experiencing such vital processes as academic, social, psychological, and cognitive acts of engagement in various “nested,” social contexts (Skinner & Fitz, 2012).

It is due to this positive on-going transactional relationship between student acts of engagement and adolescent development across social contexts that researchers contend engagement is conceptualized as a process and an outcome (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Skinner & Fitzer, 2012). As students participate in acts of engagement in various social ecologies, researchers agree youth can avoid what Finn (1989) described as the slow “chain of events” (p. 119) and Green et al., (2012) as the “vicious cycle” (p. 1120), of disengagement over time which leads to negative school and social outcomes (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Instead, as students experience the energy of “proximal processes” (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 10) (i.e. engagement across numerous environments), adolescent development in the form of persistence when facing challenges (Klem & Connell, 2004), and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), are but a few of the positive outcomes. It is this third and most recent conceptualization of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), which underlies socio-ecological models of student engagement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Lawson and Lawson's (2013) depiction of transactional engagement in figure 1 and the American Psychological Association's (APA) Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (McCombs, 1997) in figure 5 (elaborated upon in the conceptual framework), are two such conceptualizations undergirded by socio-ecological theory. Figure 2 is still another such conceptualization (Appleton et al., 2008), which positions the concept of engagement as a product of multiple socio-ecologies and individual self-system processes and acts as a predictor of positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes.

Therefore, Appleton et al's., (2008) continuum of engagement proceeds along the path of

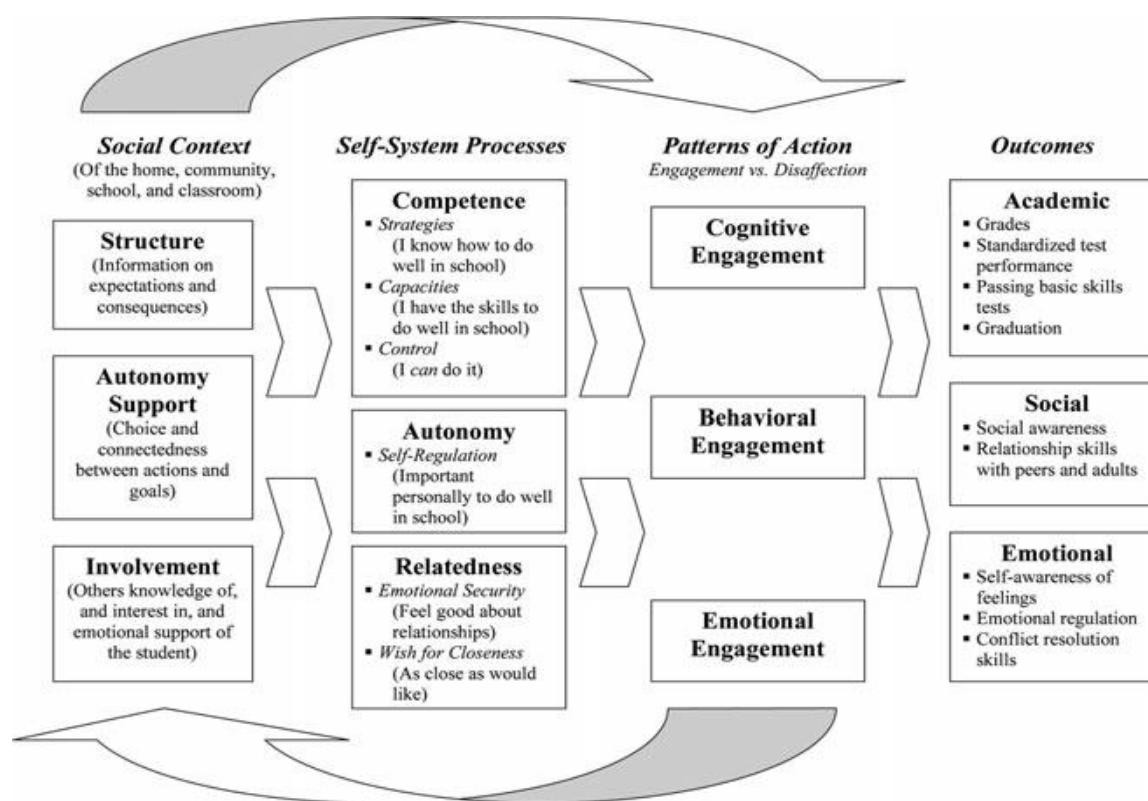


Figure 2. Adapted from "Student Engagement with School: Critical Conceptual and Methodological Issues of the Construct," by J.J. Appleton, S.L. Christenson, & M.J. Furlong, 2008, *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(5), p. 380. Copyright 2008 by Wiley Periodicals.

context → self → action → outcomes, accounting for multiple environments providing the opportunities adolescents need to satisfy their basic psychological needs (Christenson,

Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Martin, 2009 & 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Following such supportive contextual experiences, self-embodies the adolescent student's construction of motivational self-system processes arranged around the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). These self-system processes, in turn, are the inward building materials used by adolescents to constructively engage in actions which produce such positive outcomes as academic achievement and student success (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012); and the avoidance of such at-risk behaviors as boredom, disaffection, poor school attendance, behavior problems, and drop-out (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

According to Toshalis and Nakkula (2012), conceived in this way student engagement is a “decisive turning point in the web of causality that links individual students’ experiences to their behaviors in school and beyond” (p. 18). Researchers contend it is within and during the complex interactions between positive internal (psychological) and external (social) experiences where learners decide to engage and experience resulting positive personal and school outcomes (Appleton et al., 2008; Chuang, Shen, & Judge, 2016; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Conversely, if learners’ various ecological experiences are primarily negative, they may likely choose to disengage due to such adverse, alienating, and disaffecting conditions (De Laet et al., 2016; Green et al., 2012; Martin, 2009; Virtanen, Kiuru, Lerkkanen, Poikkeus, & Kuorelahti, 2016). The looping arrows in figure 2 denote researchers’ aforementioned “virtuous or vicious cycles” (Green et al., 2012), demonstrating the positively and negatively reinforcing propensities of engagement cycles.

Therefore, armed with the knowledge that students desire autonomy and competence with their learning (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010), practitioners can enhance their classroom and school environments upon learners’ capabilities of self-reporting on their

engagement and environment fit processes for creating their own pathways to learning and academic success (Eccles et al., 1993; Hattie, 2009; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). When learners are equipped to understand the construct of engagement as an affective, cognitive, and environmental mediator over time (Martin, 2009; Wang & Eccles, 2012), for academic and personal development, they can see the connection between engagement serving as a process and an outcome (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Furthermore, researchers have found when learners identify the various socio-ecological contexts in which they relate, such person and stage-environment fit understandings serve as an influential precursor to positive academic, personal, and social outcomes (Chuang, Shen, & Judge, 2016; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Eccles et al., 1993; Gutman & Eccles, 2007; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Martin, 2009; Zyngier, 2008).

For example, various socio-ecological influences have been shown to impact the ability of the learner to control her attention, effort, and energy towards a given learning activity in self-determining and self-regulating action (Bandura, 1991; Bembenutty & Karabenick, 2013; Deci & Ryan, 2009; Kim, Oh, Chiaburu, & Brown, 2012). This is crucial because the ability of the learner to actively participate in the learning process is evidence of the constructivism which many researchers and practitioners consider foundational for student success (Hanim, Rasidi, & Abidin, 2012; Gijbels, Van de Watering, Dochy, & Van den Bosche, 2006; Livengood, Lewallen, Leatherman, & Maxwell, 2012; McCombs, 2003). Multiple motivational and learning theories related to student engagement (Bandura, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Eccles & Wang; McCombs 2003 & 2009), posit learners “build knowledge rather than absorb knowledge” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 18), believing learners are active agents in choosing whether to engage or disengage with particular learning opportunities. Therefore, if a specific learning experience accounts for the interrelatedness of a learner’s various social ecologies, such as

classroom, school, family, peers, extra-curricular, and out-of-school contexts (Lawson & Lawson, 2013), the individual learner may better see the potential for interest, relevance, control, and success within the learning encounter, and are more likely to engage and persist with the learning (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2012).

Another interacting relationship within Lawson and Lawson's (2013) model of transactional engagement, is between student dispositions and drivers of engagement and student acts of engagement. Similar to the aforementioned researchers' theorizing of engagement occurring during the critical interaction between psychological and sociological processes, according to Lawson and Lawson (2013), student engagement dispositions also lie at the center of such interactions. Researchers (Lawson & Lawson, 2013) consider dispositions as the "will and skill" (p. 448) or agency they bring to the socio-ecological context. Cleary and Zimmerman (2012), state such dispositions include students' prior experiences, knowledge, interests, and evolving sense of self, as well as their future aspirations.

According to Lawson and Lawson (2013), dispositions act as drivers for future student engagement experiences. Eccles and Wang (2012) agree, however, warn dispositions are not immutable, but rather ever-changing based on continuous interactions and experiences across their various social contexts (Crick, 2012). Student maladaptive habit-forming can occur interchangeably during engagement cycles, causing relapses in previously developed adaptive habit-forming (Oyersman, Johnson, & James, 2011). Considering the malleability of student engagement dispositions, since they emerge and evolve as students respond to their social environments (Barron, 2006; Linnakyla & Maylin, 2008; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012), Lawson and Lawson (2013) contend different types of student engagement dispositions may develop over time, based upon an individual's internal psychological and external sociological processes.

Categorized by researchers (Lawson & Lawson, 2013) into four student disposition and driver typologies, student initiative, student investment, student ambivalence, and student disidentification, it is these dispositions and drivers which influence and predict students' future motivational and engagement propensities, positively or negatively. Researchers emphasize (Oyersman et al, 2011), it is student identity-related drivers, meaning a learners' "particular possible identity" (p. 475), or "who they are and who they want to become" (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 452), which are the primary determinants of future acts of student engagement or disengagement, not academic and activity driven frameworks for engagement. This point is significant because it represents hope for learners and educators alike that engagement dispositions for modifying student success directions lie within the learner, not without; within his or her control, not in being controlled (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Such a constructivist approach is fitting for a learner-centered conceptual framework and the students' psychological needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Lawson and Lawson's (2013) student acts of engagement, are comprised of what the extant engagement literature designates as states of experience (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Pekrun & Linnebrink-Garcia, 2012), learners active participation in educational, co-curricular, or youth community-based activities across their social ecologies. These states of experience encompass such activities as Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow like engagement, where the learner's experience is so all-consuming, no regard for time or other basic needs appear to matter; active collaboration among peers and with teachers; field experience; independent study (Wong, 2015); and project-based learning (Hall & Miro, 2016; Robinson, 2013). Importantly, states of experience involve all dimensions of engagement,

affective, behavioral, and cognitive, attending to the utilitarian and intellectual needs of the learner (Fredricks & McCloskey, 2012).

However, researchers (Lawson & Lawson, 2013) assert the significance of extending conceptualizations of the historical indicators of engagement to include attentional, positional, and social-cultural qualities of engagement. Attentional acts of engagement (Pekrun & Linnebrink-Garcia, 2012), suggest students' social, device/technology, school activities, people, and place/social setting orientations, all exemplify the importance of a learner's focus on specific objects of their attention. Emerging neuroscience over the last two decades has shown students' attentional engagement can serve as a powerful focus for processing new learning, even when competing emotional goals appear in conflict with their prioritized attentional needs (Furrer et al., 2006; Willis, 2014)

Positional acts of engagement are characterized by researchers (Brooks, Brooks, & Goldstein, 2012; Crick, 2012; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, & Poirier, 2014), as developmentally appropriate experiences within stage-person-activity environments. When students are positioned as agentic learners (Bandura, 2001), over mere procedural recipients (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012) of the banking system of teaching and learning (Busey & Russell, 2016), who are expected to accept deposits and withdrawals upon demand of adults passively, they demonstrate such characteristics as actively expressing their thoughts, beliefs, opinions (Ainley, 2012); directing their own learning (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012); interacting collaboratively with learning community peers (Mahatmya et al., 2012); and are oriented towards the development of such 21st century competencies and skills as innovation, personal autonomy, creativity, critical thinking, and interpersonal communication (Crick, 2012; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Social-cultural acts of student engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013), include empathetic nuances such as cultural congruence (Busey & Russell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016), where learners experience an understanding for their personal and group identities while experiencing a learning activity. Other social-cultural acts include cultural relevance (Davis & McPartland, 2012; Eccles & Wang, 2012), encouraging diverse learners to choose culturally specific pathways to acquire and demonstrate their learning as well as culturally preferred affective and cognitively expressions of their student experiences. Lastly, cultural correspondence (Crick, 2012), includes tapping into the power of the diversity of learners' prior knowledge and experiences of their cultural background. This last characteristic is significant due to the growing language learner populations in many local contexts and the need to build bridges of engagement for mutual acculturation and new literacy pathways as well as to avoid negative school outcomes (Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012).

In summary of a transactional model of engagement, it is the conceptualization of a dynamic, synergistic, and interacting process of multiple social-ecologies, without regard to a specific temporal order (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). While accepting the broad agreement of among researchers of the multi-dimensional nature of engagement, transactional models of engagement seek to extend student engagement in significant ways. These include expanding student engagement research frameworks to include family, extra-curricular, co-curricular, youth-community, and out-of-school organization ecologies. They also involve focusing on socio-ecological dispositions and drivers of engagement, and their impact on student acts of engagement, such as attentional, positional, and social-cultural engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). While appreciating and embracing the importance and necessity of the extant research

on student engagement, socio-ecological researchers contend such conceptualizations are insufficient to account for all learners' student engagement needs (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Definition of engagement. Therefore, bolstered by researchers call to employ more precise conceptualizations of engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Reschly & Christenson, 2012), I intend for the purpose of this research study to conceptualize engagement as the cognitive and psychological glue which connects socio-ecological influences, internal motivational processes, and student voice to learner agency for enabling new learning experiences, positive developmental outcomes, and self-determining life pathways (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). One of the reasons for pursuing a greater understanding of such a nuanced definition of engagement is due to the normative decline in student engagement for many learners as they progress into and throughout their secondary school experience (Busteed, 2013; Fredricks et al., 2011; Gallup, 2014; High School Study of Student Engagement, 2011 [HSSSE]; Parsons et al, 2014; Toshiaki and Nakkula, 2012; Yazzie Mintz, 2010). According to Busteed (2013), in his report findings from a nationwide 2012 Gallup poll of kindergarten to twelfth (K-12) students, student engagement drops significantly from elementary to junior high/middle school and finally into high school (see figure 3).

Traditionally, student engagement has been the construct for understanding at-risk, apathetic, and disaffected learners who exhibit characteristics associated with a trajectory towards school drop-out (Finn, 1989). However, the principal appeal of engagement is its relevance for all students (Christenson et al., 2012). The voluminous and diverse nature of student engagement studies and measurement instruments implemented with the goal of positive secondary school reform is a testimony to the universal promise student engagement bears for student success and life readiness (Christenson et al., 2012; Fredricks et al., 2011).

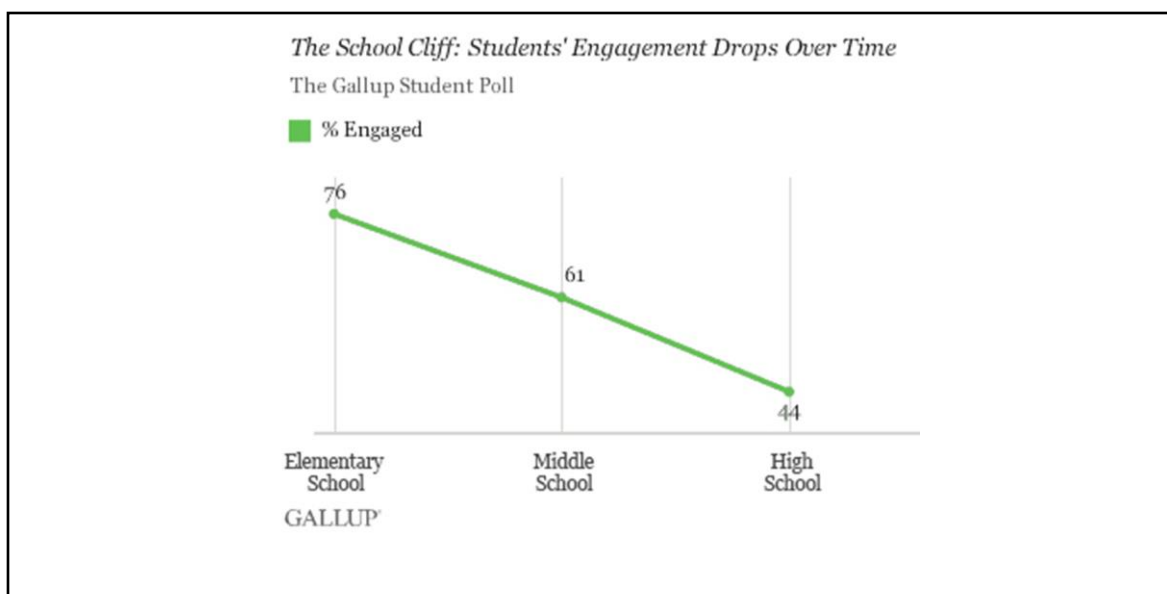


Figure 3. The Gallup Student Poll surveyed nearly 500,000 students in grades five through 12 from more than 1,700 public schools in 37 states in 2012. Gallup reported that nearly eight in 10 elementary students who participated in the poll were engaged with school. By middle school that falls to about six in 10 students. And by high school, only four in 10 students qualified as engaged. “The School Cliff: Student Engagement Drops With Each School Year,” by Brandon Busted, 2013, Gallup.

For learners from families with financial and emotional security, or parent(s) who have been beneficiaries of positive school experiences themselves, or from communities which hold a high value for public education, a lack of engagement may be frustrating and unfortunate, but survivable (Engaging Schools, 2003; Swanson, 2009). According to Robinson and Aronica (2015), learners with stable environments often experience multiple avenues of learner engagement, both in and out of school, and matriculate through high school graduation and on to further educational opportunities. Nonetheless, the benefits and competencies which accompany student engagement are significant for all learners (Fredricks et al., 2004; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008; Wylie, 2009).

However, due to such factors as socio-economic status, ethnicity, or inequitable access to effective teachers and educational resources, disadvantaged learners may suffer consequences

disproportionally due to a decline in engagement in school (Sturgis & Patrick, 2010). When at-risk learners experience a decline in student engagement they are much less likely to finish high school and subsequently encounter limited opportunities for post-secondary success. When learners fail to finish school and acquire the most rudimentary knowledge and skills necessary for functioning as an independent adult, the risk of such adverse social factors as unemployment, poverty, poor health, and involvement in the criminal justice system heighten ominously (Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 2011; Skinner et al., 2008). Therefore, contextualized conceptions of student engagement across multiple ecologies are crucial for both intervening to re-engage at-risk learners and for pursuing equitable school reforms in support of “getting learning right the first time, every time” for every child (Rickabaugh, 2015, p. 1).

The importance of engagement. A robust consensus exists among educational psychologists and researchers supporting the belief children and adolescents are innately curious and hungry learners, possessing a natural desire to construct meaning out of their learning environment and experiences (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, & 2002; Kim, 2014; Kohn, 1993 & 1999; McCombs, 2012; Niemiec and Ryan, 2012; Robinson & Aronica, 2015; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). In fact, Niemiec & Ryan (2012) emphatically state, “students’ natural tendencies to learn represent perhaps the greatest resource educators can tap” (pg. 134). Therefore, the importance of understanding the conditions which optimize learners’ affective, behavioral, cognitive, and socio-ecological engagement needs in school is critical on several fronts (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Clarke, 2013; Clarke, Frazer, DiMartino, Fisher, & Smith, 2003; Collier, 2015; Education Week, 2014; Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Hardre, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009; Kohn, 1999; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Robinson & Aronica, 2015).

Firstly, preparing learners for post-secondary success in college, career, and community

requires the active engagement of students during their school experience, especially as they progress into and through their secondary school years. Robinson (2010) makes analogous the theorized climate crisis with a crisis in the use of human resources. Citing his work with educational systems, corporations, and not-for-profit organizations from around the world, Robinson (2009) reports countless stories of people who are living unfulfilled lives because they don't know, and consequently aren't following, their passions and true talents. "Human resources are like natural resources; they're often buried deep. You have to go looking for them; they're not just lying around. You have to create the circumstances where they show themselves" (Robinson, 2010). Therefore, it is vital to provide real-world, relevant, safe, and socially connected environments which engage learners to construct meaning and self-knowledge as well to control and own their learning.

Secondly, one of the primary purposes of education should be to contribute to the discovery of learners' passions, talents, and interests; however, education is instead partly responsible for hindering learners from this purposeful process (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Rickabaugh, 2015; Robinson, 2010; Sizer, 2004a). By structuring school around top-down driven standardization, and subsequent teacher-directed instructional experiences, little to no time remains for developing relationships of significance between learners and educators for mining learners' passions, interests, and talents (Hattie, 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004; Martin, 2009; Quin, 2016). Understanding such reasons for the decline in engagement in school helps illuminate (Bordage, 2009) the nature of the problem and potentially facilitates the types of educational practices needed to engage learners cognitively, psychologically, and socio-ecologically, so learners develop agency for new learning, positive developmental outcomes, and self-determining life pathways.

Engaging adolescent learners, whether those who have become marginalized or disengaged from school, or those who are seemingly engaged at school, but in reality have only learned how to play the game of school, is an accomplishable task. Both engagement and motivation theorists and researchers agree to the malleability of each construct (Christenson et al., 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Whether it be reengaging the superficial successful learners, who in actuality are primarily motivated by external carrot and stick motivators (Kohn, 1993; Sizer, 2004a); or connecting with the disengaged, disregarded, and diminished students who exhibit the precursory demeanor to actual physically dropping out of school, motivational dropout (Hardre, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009), both are much needed. Therefore, gaining an understanding of the innate, inherent, and distinctive developmental resources (McCombs, 2012; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) which adolescent learners' come equipped with can enable educators to harness such powerful resources for creating engaging classroom and school environments.

For example, tapping into learners' psychological need for autonomy and growing learner independence (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, & 2002; McCombs, 2012; Pink, 2009) could enable secondary school educators to move away from their historical "habit and tradition" (Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012, p. 36) of expecting blind obedience to conform and comply with predetermined educator outcomes, and move to more agentic learning experiences (Bandura, 2001; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Conversely, although adolescent learners' psychological need for autonomy is prominent, educators must equally understand how often secondary school students' youthfulness, inexperience, and incomplete knowledge do not allow them to fully comprehend the importance of developing pathways of success in school (Eccles & Wang, 2012). Therefore, educators' professional recognition of the primacy of another basic

psychological need of learners, relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985), would empower educators to create an interactive and connected environment to build upon learners' psychological needs for belonging and competency. Providing such optimal social conditions for learners would strengthen the bond of trust between learner and educator, which in turn would lead to learners' enhanced confidence in their teachers' stated importance of success in school (Christenson, Reschly, and Wylie, 2012).

Instead, for many secondary school learners, a decline in engagement is the normative experience (Ladson-Billings, 2016). Researchers such as Yazzie-Mintz (2010), noted of the over 42,000 United States ninth to twelfth grade students who participated in the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), two out of three high school students (66%) said they were bored in class at least every day in school; one of six students (17%) said they were bored in every class of every day of school; while only 4% of students said they were never bored in school. Parsons & Taylor (2011) cited less than half of Canadian secondary school learners surveyed were engaged in their academic studies, with engagement levels falling each year from 6th through 12 grades (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009); while Gallup (2014) reported of the 800,000 fifth through twelfth grade students surveyed, only 53% of students stated they were engaged in school, with 28% stating they were not engaged, and 17% actively disengaged.

Additional testimony to the importance of engagement in schools and classrooms was revealed by Wiggins (as cited in Strauss, 2014), who conducted a two-day shadowing of high school learners. Wiggins' research revealed students sitting the majority of the day passively while listening to teachers talk, and the accompanying perception of learners serving as an apparent nuisance to teachers, due to their repetitive calls for students to pay attention or remain quiet. Wiggins' findings were initially made public anonymously on her father's blog post,

noted educator and author of *Understanding by Design*, Grant Wiggins, where her report obviously resonated with several others, as evidenced by over 650,000 hits to the website. However, the elder Wiggins (2014) commented his daughter's findings were not a new revelation, but instead just another report helping frame the importance of engagement as an active, versus passive, and relevant, versus irrelevant, classroom experience.

Researchers and practitioners cite the rigidity of predetermined standardized curriculums (Clarke, 2013; Clarke, Frazer, DiMartino, Fisher, & Smith, 2003; Sizer, 2013), the antiquated industrial-age design model of schooling (Clarke, 2013; Reigeluth et al., 2016; Robinson & Aronica, 2015; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012), a lack of opportunities for autonomy, mastery, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, & 2002; Kohn, 1993 & 1999; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), and lack of learner input into the decisions which affect their daily school experiences (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Cook-Sather, 2006; McCombs, 2012; Mitra, 2003, 2005, & 2009; Rickabaugh, 2014; Watkins, 2015 & 2016), as some of the primary reasons for the predominance of the decline in engagement among secondary school learners.

Summary of subsection related to the problem of practice. Learners' decline of engagement in school is a phenomenon which increases throughout students' K-12 educational careers. However, the lament of a decline in engagement of students as they move from elementary to secondary schools has been found to be reversible with the use of effective and inexpensive actions (Collier, 2015); with notable others documenting the positive outcomes of student engagement in school (Christenson et al., 2012; Clarke et al., 2003; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015; Hardre et al., 2009; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Skinner et al., 2008; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Trowler & Trowler, 2011).

Motivation

One of the purposes of this scholarly literature review was to examine the theories of motivation interrelated with student engagement for the purpose of framing this research study (Boote & Belle, 2005; Maxwell, 2013). Researchers, educators, and policymakers maintain the internal and psychological process of motivation is too often an overlooked piece of school reform (Center on Education Policy, 2012; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015; Hardre et al., 2009; Kohn, 1993 & 1999; McCombs, 2007; McCombs & Vakili, 2005; Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009; Wolf, 2010). The traditional reliance on external controls to move learners towards academic achievement and compliant behavior result in a loss of interest in learning and students who are bored, diminished, disaffected, and disengaged with school in the short run (Niemic & Ryan, 2012). In the long run, using rewards and punishment (Kohn, 1993 & 1999), to motivate youth results in a lack of development within learners of the agency necessary for self-determining success in school and life pathway readiness. Ignoring this critical piece of developing a larger learner-centered approach to educating youth is a recipe for disengagement and learned helplessness (McCombs & Vakili, 2005; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Wolfe & Poon, 2015; Christenson et al., 2012; Reigeluth et al., 2016).

Historically, motivation has been categorized as either extrinsic or intrinsic, with the former associated with a behaviorist framework, and the latter with a constructivist framework (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Extrinsic motivation theorists contend externalities introduced upon learners stimulates students' energy towards specific learning activities (Appleton et al., 2008). In contrast, intrinsic motivation theorists conclude it is an internal psychological and cognitive aligning of the learning activity with prior learning and the person's sense of self which energizes learning (APA, 1997; Eccles & Wang, 2012; McCombs, 2003; Reschly &

Christenson, 2012; Zimmerman, 2002 & 2008). Accordingly, the relationship between the constructs of motivation and engagement are evident, noting motivated learners are those who have opportunities for choice and control (McCombs, 2012; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

Investigation of the major theories of motivation research reveals five primary dimensions of motivation: autonomy, competence, relatedness, interest, and relevance (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Toshielis & Nakkula, 2012). Motivation theories inform educators and learners alike about the internal conditions which must exist to initiate, energize, and maintain new learning. If learners can understand what makes them motivated to pursue educational goals, then greater learner agency and independence for secondary school successful learning experiences and the life-long pursuit of chosen pathways could be realized (Toshielis & Nakkula, 2012).

Self-determination theory. Deci & Ryan's (1985) seminal work of self-determination theory (SDT) provides the underpinnings of motivational understanding in the field of educational psychology. SDT is built on the foundation that individuals have natural propensities for interacting with the world around them and internalizing those experiences for sense making, self-formation, and self-identification (Deci & Ryan, 198, 2000, & 2002). SDT posits the synthesis of new experiences and knowledge with a person's existing understandings to authenticate a learner's emerging personality and potential for self-actualizing actions.

Conversely, SDT also acknowledges aspects of the behaviorist explanation of human motivation, specifically the impact of external reinforcement. Deci & Ryan (2000) suggest individuals can and will move towards goals which do not naturally emanate from a real sense of self, (i.e. goals the individual chooses freely to pursue or has a sense of confidence for developing competence) if such external forces prove compatible with self-internalization

realities. For example, a learner may choose to learn about a topic not primarily of interest to them if the learner sees the long-term value in the acquisition of such learning towards their own autonomous goals, or if the learner could explore the topic in a collaborative and connected effort with other students.

Therefore, seeking to blend the tenets of both constructivist and behaviorist motivational camps, SDT posits a dialectical approach to human motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which accounts for both the integration of internal and external forces for self-determination. SDT purports external forces can positively shape a person's actions, potential, and self-development, but only if integrated and aligned with their truest and congruent sense of self. Therefore, since SDT theorizes individuals have essential psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, SDT is supportive of external environmental conditions where learners are allowed voice and choice to internalize an authentic development of the self (Niemi & Ryan, 2012).

Consequently, when educators develop learning environments and experiences which recognize an understanding of learners' most basic motivational needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, a more engaging experience can be realized for the diversity of learners in today's classrooms (Niemi & Ryan, 2012). Furthermore, when students understand what motivates and drives them for engaging and owning their learning as a secondary school learner, the potential for transfer of such skills into adulthood is greatly enhanced (Diagostino & Olsen, 2015). Conversely, when educators focus primarily or solely on a teacher, curriculum, or standards-based centered delivery model, without accounting for the motivational needs of learners, disengagement in school and post-secondary life is an all too often result (Frederick & McColskey, 2012).

Additional motivation theories. A reoccurring theme among constructivist theories of motivation is they address one or more of the three primary engagement dimensions, affective, behavioral, or cognitive, as well as the primary psychological motivational drivers of autonomy, competency, interest/value, and relatedness. The Center on Education Policy (2012) summarized several of these social science theories of motivation and their positive impact on student learning. Two predominant motivational theories with direct bearing on student engagement are self-regulation and value-expectancy theories (Christenson et al., 2012). The abundance of research documenting the relationship between engagement domains and motivational drivers serves as sound evidence to Toshalis & Nakkula's (2012) claim of an existing web of causality, sufficient to warrant applied research with a local problem of practice.

Expectancy-value theory. The role learner expectations play in classroom and school experiences of learning is a powerful predictor of student success (Eccles et al., 1993). Researchers (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles & Wang, 2012) posit the central thrust of expectancy-value theory as learners self-motivating themselves to engage in learning experiences which they expect a reasonable measure of success and consequently value those success-oriented experiences over other possible pursuits. As Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) frame, when learners have a mental disposition for success, they will likely succeed at hitting the learning target. Researchers theorize learners' expectations for success and value provide fuel for persevering towards the accomplishment of a goal, even in the face of adversity and challenges (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Researchers contend (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012) learners' level of motivation hinges on how they answer two internal psychological questions. First, "what reasonable expectation do I have that I will succeed at this activity?" and second, "How much do I value this activity or its

results compared to other things I might be doing?” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 11). These questions deal with the learner’s confidence in her already acquired internal capacities and the support she will receive from significant peers and adults in the learning process (Eccles & Wang, 2012). Learners perform their own cost-benefit analysis (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012) when weighing the option to select and persist towards a specifically targeted learning goal. As learners employ this internal psychological process, they are juxtaposing whether they can expect success with the targeted or available learning opportunity and judging its relative worth against other viable options (Eccles et al., 1993). As educational practitioners come to realize the vital role facilitation and support play in conjunction with individual learners’ internal expectations for success, a heightened sense of teacher-efficacy for impacting student success can be generated (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Rickabaugh, 2016; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Conversely, researchers (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Osborne, 2007; Smith & Hung, 2008) have discovered students on the periphery of positive school experiences lack expectations for success and value of available learning opportunities. Sometimes these students’ operating systems have been set into a negative cycle of expectation based on the internalization of perceived stereotyping from either “successful” school community learners, the adults who lead school learning and socialization processes, or the school environment in which they operate (Darensbourg & Blake, 2013). Such a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006) triggers a sort of paralysis, which handicaps these self-marginalized or genuinely stereotyped learners. When learners perceive they are stereotyped, they internally appraise they are incompetent and lack the requisite knowledge, ability, or skills to perform academically (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Characterized as performance anxiety (Hill et al., 2016; Watkins, 2010), learners who experience this internal phenomenon typically appear distracted from immediate classroom

activities, or expend their available energy expected for self-effort in learning on non-academic pursuits. Such disengagement at the classroom and school levels generate internal student feelings of incompetence or ambivalence towards learning in school (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Steele, 1997). This process sets a pattern of the learner devaluing the importance of success in school and eventually entertaining considerations they don't belong in the school context (Finn, 1989).

According to researchers (Dweck, 2006; Steele, 1997; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012), such adverse internalizations by learners lead to low academic self-concept and predicts adherence to expectations of future low ability. Subsequently, such disengaged learners invest energies intended for cognitive and emotional expenditure in learning experiences towards such maladaptive behavior as an apparent motivation to fail (Eccles et al., 1993). This construct is what educational researchers have noted as student disidentification with school (Rumberger, 2011; Steele, 1997).

Disidentifying students are those who perceive they are outside of the school culture of success. However, researchers theorize it is a systemic mismatch between existing school structures and adolescent developmental needs which place students outside the reach of school success (Eccles et al., 1993). Known as stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993), researchers contend as learners move from the elementary environment of intentionally planned longstanding teacher-student and student-student small group relationships to secondary environments characterized by larger, impersonal comprehensive experiences, adolescents' ongoing developmental needs for relatedness, guidance, and identity formation go mostly unmet (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Turner et al., (2002) reported one response of learners in dealing with perceived environmental

exclusion from relatedness and competency experiences in school is avoidance behaviors. Intent on avoiding a cycle of failure, some learners guard themselves against perceptions of incompetence by such disengaging acts of withdrawing effort, playing dumb, disguising task-oriented activity as learning, and avoiding asking for help (Turner et al., 2002).

According to Ryan, Pintrich, and Midgley (2001), school professionals risk drawing such simplistic and false conclusions of avoidance behaviors as student laziness, failure to appreciate educational opportunities, a lack of desire to learn, or the student's family devaluing of education. Instead, researchers encourage educators to abandon such assumptions for an empathetic understanding of students' potential confusion and insecurities for how to positively seek the fulfillment of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001). As educators expand their understandings of student lack of motivation and disengagement to include such constructs as disidentification, greater empathy for finding socio-ecological understandings for student success may materialize (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Self-regulation theory. Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of self-regulation supplies powerful support for undergirding a learner-centered approach to student engagement (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Self-regulation theory posits self-influence as the primary engine of causation for purposeful actions, even in the face of external forces (Bandura, 1991). Such knowledge holds excellent promise for learners and the adults who support them across their multiple social-ecologies (Klem & Connell, 2004; Quin, 2016; Paraskeva, Mysirlaki, & Choustoulakis, 2009; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011); in understanding the developmental appropriateness of learners emerging as the primary agent and contributor for

their own engagement, and its subsequent benefits and competencies, during their secondary school experience (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Bandura, 2001)

Self-regulating learners understand the locus of control (agency) for goal setting, focus, effort, purposeful activity, reflection, collaboration, and meaning-making lies within themselves (Bembenutty & Karabenick, 2013; Hanim, Mohd Rasidi, & Zainol Abidin, 2012; Hattie, 2008; McCombs, 2015; Sitzmann & Ely, 2011; Zimmerman, 1990, 2002, & 2008; Zucconi, 2015).

Summary of subsection related to the problem of practice. Kohn (2010) suggests, “...it is impossible to motivate students...in fact, it’s not really possible to motivate anyone, except perhaps yourself” (pg. 1). However, educational practitioners may engage learners through the use of research and evidence-based motivational understandings, and therefore provide the conditions to influence learners for life positively. When educators consider a constructivist approach to learning, which contends all students have intrinsic motivations, desires, and needs for new learning (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2008), students who are advantaged and disadvantaged stand to benefit from classroom environments which implement and champion such an approach.

Voice

Students are voiceless for the most part when it comes to educational reform concerning such issues as classroom curriculum choice and structure of the environment (Elwood, 2013). Researchers have noted when learners have meaningful input into daily decisions about their school experience they demonstrate student voice (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). These could include the organizational use of learning time (pace), preference of learning environment (place), or preference in learning representation and expression (path) (Bray & McClaskey, 2015). Learners bring a valuable perspective to any learning process, and a growing body of

research reveals when educators listen, respect, and respond to student input seriously, positive learner outcomes, such as ownership of learning, occur (Cook-Sather, 2006).

According to the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2011) model core teaching standards, learner voice is about student agency and activity in determining what they learn, how they learn, and how they will exhibit and apply their learning. CCSSO's model core teaching standards encourage educators everywhere that teaching must begin with the learner because it is the learner who is ultimately responsible for their learning (CCSSO, 2011). Student ownership of learning means learners' voices count for directing, reflecting, improving upon, and taking responsibility for their learning (CCSSO, 2015). Learner voice accounts for the student's daily contribution and influences towards learning activities, and thus ownership of their learning (Mitre, 2006).

An ever apparent shift in pedagogy is emerging for 21st-century educators, with teachers projected to hold high expectations for learners' acceptance of ownership for their learning (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; CCSSO, 2015; Rickabaugh, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). In order to facilitate learner voice and ownership of learning, today's educators must shift their practice to include collaboration with learners as co-designers of their learning to ensure authenticity and ownership of learning by the student (McIntyre, 2015). For learners to construct knowledge, teacher pedagogy must shift from traditional approaches of compliance to pre-determined, one-size fits all teacher lesson plans, to personalized opportunities for authentic learner input as a co-contributor with the teacher for learning outcomes.

Expounding on this shift in educator pedagogy, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) explain how learner voice becomes the third construct in the trifecta of student learning:

Understood as the capacity to act in a way that produces meaningful change in oneself or the environment, agency is the key to student voice. Time and again, research has shown

that the more educators give students choice, control, challenge, and collaborative opportunities, the more motivation and engagement are likely to rise (p.27).

In turn, motivated and engaged learners who act and contribute as primary agents in the learning process develop more ownership of their learning, resulting in such positive outcomes as self-direction, authentic and creative work, persistence with complex problems, and overall college and career readiness (CCSSO, 2011; Conley & French, 2014).

Summary of subsection related to the problem of practice. Learner voice and ownership of learning are about learners expressing agency and increasing control over their learning. Personalized educational experiences move away from the teacher being in sole control and management of the learning process to make room for the learner's voice and agency. Building learner capacity for ownership of learning requires educators to entrust learners with increasing amounts of responsibility for co-designing curriculum, setting learning goals, and providing evidence of competency in agreed upon learner outcomes. Educator pedagogy which moves in this direction lends proof to the belief that the most critical instructional decisions, those with the most significant influence on student success, are those made by the learners themselves (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2008). As secondary school learners develop their voice and ownership of learning in interdependence with teachers and peers, greater learner independence will be the result.

Conceptual Framework

A review and synthesis of the extant literature on student engagement, my personal and professional experiences as an educational leader, and an understanding of important theories related to learning has led to the development of the conceptual framework for this study. The problem of practice of the decline in student engagement of learners as they proceed throughout their secondary school experience will be undergirded and informed by a learner-centered

conceptual framework. This conceptual framing drives the chosen methodology of phenomenology, the data collection methods of focus groups and individual interviews, because “students need a voice, not a survey” (as cited in Yazzie-Mintz, 2010), and the data analysis plan for interpreting the perceived lived experiences of secondary students (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Therefore, seeing the problem of practice through a learner-centered lens will inform, organize, frame, and focus the research process.

The voices and identities of learners are hidden in a teaching and teaching-centered approach to secondary school education (Watkins, 2016). Researchers argue a more person-centered approach is required to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse population of learners our schools serve, including their attainment to higher levels of cognitive engagement and subsequent academic achievement (Aspy & Roebuck, 1972; Cornelius-White, 2007; McCombs, 2003; Meece, 2003; Rogers & Frieberg, 1994; Thomas, 2000; Zucconi, 2015). Therefore, while researchers continue to support the importance of curriculum, content, learning standards, developmentally appropriate learning experiences, and the best of research-informed instructional practices, they contend these are insufficient without also focusing equally on the needs of the individual learner (McCombs, 2003 & 2004; McCombs & Quait, 2002; McCombs & Whisler, 2003; Meece, 2003; Watkins, 2016; Weinberger & McCombs, 2003).

According to McCombs (2003), a learner centered conceptual framework necessitates a dual focus on individual learners - their backgrounds, experiences, interests, talents, expectancies, heredity, and needs; and on learning – the best of what we know about learning, how it occurs, and how it informs instructional practices which are conducive to increasing motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners (see Figure 4). A learner-centered

paradigm supports the notion that schools are living ecosystems, environments which exist for student success and the symbiotic purpose of learning for both the student and those who

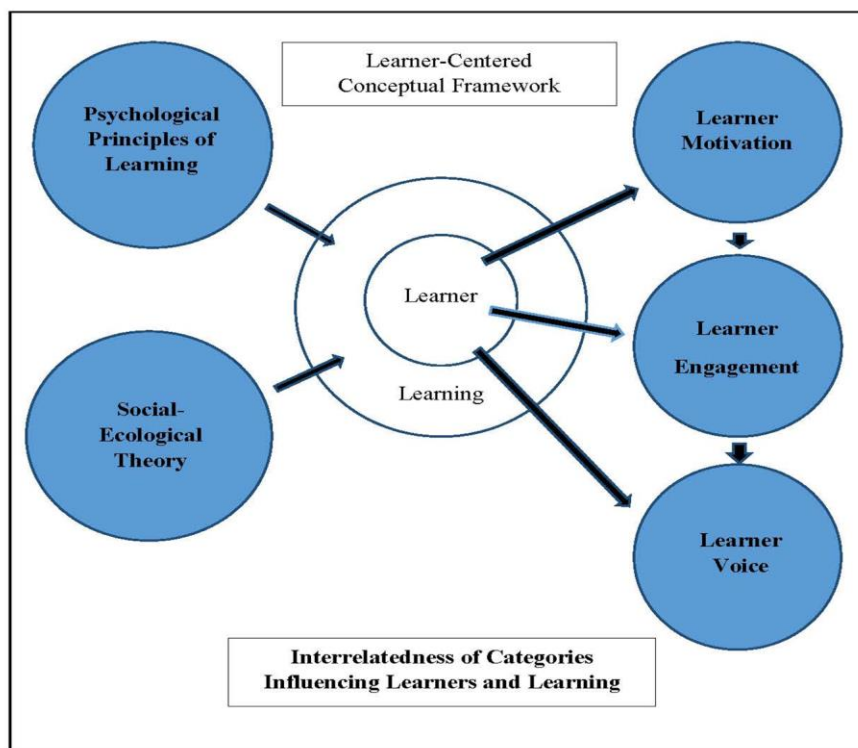


Figure 4. A learner-centered conceptual framework is based on a recognition of the inter-relatedness of APA’s Psychological Principles of Learning, which include cognitive, affective, adolescent and social development, and diversity of the individual domains, and influenced by socio-ecological theory and the constructs of learner engagement, learner motivation, and learner voice. Adapted from “The Learner-Centered Classroom and School: Strategies for Increasing Student Motivation and Achievement,” by B.L. McCombs and J.S. Whisler, (1st ed.), p. 12. Copyright 1997 by Jossey-Bass.

facilitate and sustain the learning process (teachers, administrators, parents, and community members) (McCombs, 2003; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Rickabaugh, 2012 & 2013).

Essentially, a learner-centered framework conceptualizes schools as communities committed to learners and learning.

Developing a learner-centered approach to schooling was initiated by the American Psychological Association (APA), who appointed a special Task Force on Psychology in

Education in the 1990's (APA Work Group, 1997; Wagner & McCombs, 1995; McCombs, 2003). The workgroup's purpose was to bring together research and theory from the fields of psychology and education for the formation and use of learner-centered principles in schools. The workgroup's final composition included 14 principles across four research-validated domains (Figure 5) (APA, 1997). The learner-centered framework encompasses practicing these psychological and educational principles to inform and drive school design, reform, practice, and policy-making in support of learning for all (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Therefore, the learner-centered framework properly conceived provides the twofold focus on individual learners and learning, either insufficient without the other (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Two other marks of a learner-centered conceptual framework are its explicit recognition and validation of the diversity of individual learners which exist within schools; and a clear differentiation between a child or student-centered conceptual framework and a learner-centered framework (McCombs, 2012). According to McCombs and Whisler (1997), while a child or student-centered approach has its emphasis on the K-12 or even pre-K through college based experience, a learner-centered framework is inclusive of and sufficient for all people throughout their lifetimes. A learner-centered framework conceptualizes everyone possessing the identity of a life-long learner; from the cradle to the grave, from childhood through adolescence, and throughout our adult lives (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Lambert & McCombs, 1998).

Additionally, a learner-centered framework (McCombs, 2003) accounts for our nation's mobility rate continuing to fluctuate and new peoples and immigrants acculturating into our communities (United States Census Bureau, 2015). While student learning needs increase in complexity, a learner-centered framework provides both the universal application of the best of what we know about learning as well as a focus to recognize the uniqueness of each learner

(Alexander & Murphy, 1998). Therefore, a learner-centered conceptual framework focuses equally on the learner and the learning (McClaskey, 2016; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Watkins, 2016; Woelfel, 2003).

According to researchers, when educators and their practices function from a learner-centered framework, the following responsibilities will devolve upon educational practitioners: (1) School boards and school district administrators will be responsible for policies in support of learner-centered schools. (2) School administrators will be responsible for fostering a school environment conducive to personalized student learning experiences. Administrators will also be responsible for ensuring teachers know their learners and how learning best occurs. (3) Teachers will be responsible for facilitating classroom experiences which include learners in decisions about what and how they learn and how such learning will be assessed. Teachers will also be responsible for valuing each learner's unique perspective by accommodating individual differences in learners' backgrounds, interests, abilities, and experiences. Lastly, teachers will be responsible for inviting and engaging learners to serve as co-creators and partners in the teaching and learning process. Researchers contend the implementation of such a learner-centered conceptual framework can provide a pathway for school redesign and reform by educators and educational policy actors (Woelfel, 2003).

In conclusion, I conceptualize extending the learner-centered framework to include Toshalis and Nakkula's analysis (2012) of the interrelatedness of the constructs of engagement, motivation, and voice. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) term these three the "trifecta" of learner-centered learning (p. 33). Therefore, by integrating the interrelated categories of adolescent

The American Psychological Association's Psychological Principles of a Learner-Centered Framework

COGNITIVE AND METACOGNITIVE FACTORS

Principle 1: Nature of the learning process.

The learning of complex subject matter is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning from information and experience.

Principle 2: Goals of the learning process.

The successful learner, over time and with support and instructional guidance, can create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge.

Principle 3: Construction of knowledge.

The successful learner can link new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways.

Principle 4: Strategic thinking.

The successful learner can create and use a repertoire of thinking and reasoning strategies to achieve complex learning goals.

Principle 5: Thinking about thinking.

Higher order strategies for selecting and monitoring mental operations facilitate creative and critical thinking.

Principle 6: Context of learning.

Learning is influenced by environmental factors, including culture, technology, and instructional practices.

MOTIVATIONAL AND AFFECTIVE FACTORS

Principle 7: Motivational and emotional influences on learning.

What and how much is learned is influenced by the learner's motivation. Motivation to learn, in turn, is influenced by the individual's emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking.

Principle 8: Intrinsic motivation to learn.

The learner's creativity, higher order thinking, and natural curiosity all contribute to motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and providing for personal

choice and control.

Principle 9: Effects of motivation on effort.

Acquisition of complex knowledge and skills requires extended learner effort and guided practice. Without learners' motivation to learn, the willingness to exert this effort is unlikely without coercion.

DEVELOPMENTAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS

Principle 10: Developmental influence on learning.

As individuals develop, they encounter different opportunities and experience different constraints for learning. Learning is most effective when differential development within and across physical, intellectual, emotional, and social domains is taken into account.

Principle 11: Social influences on learning.

Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES FACTORS

Principle 12: Individual differences in learning.

Learners have different strategies, approaches, and capabilities for learning that are a function of prior experience and heredity.

Principle 13: Learning and diversity.

Learning is most effective when differences in learners' linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds are taken into account.

Principle 14: Standards and assessment.

Setting appropriately high and challenging standards and assessing the learner and learning progress-including diagnostic, process, and outcome assessment-are integral parts of the learning process

Figure 5. The 14 Principles of the APA's Psychological Principles of A Learner-Centered Framework Adapted from the "APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs," 1997. Copyright 1997 by the APA.

development and cognitive and psychological principles of learning with the constructs of learner engagement, motivation, and voice, a learner-centered conceptual framework has been constructed and will be employed for this research study (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Eccles & Wang, 2012; McCombs, 1995; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Rickabaugh, 2016).

Summary

The significance (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2008) of developing self-regulating and self-determining learners who are globally minded, independent, and interdependent members of society (UNESCO, 2015), makes the development of conditions conducive to learner engagement, motivation, and voice paramount. Enlightening readers to understand the value of living as socially just citizens for world sustainability and peaceful co-existence (UNESCO, 2015), supports the importance of comprehending the relationship between learner engagement, motivation, and voice for creating independent learners who are socially compassionate and contributing members of society.

Providing such a focus through learning experiences in school holds excellent potential for learners successfully transferring their acquired learning forward into post-secondary young adulthood opportunities (Diagostino & Olsen, 2015; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015). When learners have secondary school opportunities to construct an authentic sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, & 2002; Ryan & Niemiec, 2012) through an associated understanding of what motivates and engages them to own their learning, then personal, career, and community fulfillment can more readily be obtained. In contrast, current secondary school experiences are frequently driven by predetermined curriculums, acquisition of credits, course completion, and seat time (Clarke, 2010; Conley, 2005; NASSP, 2006; PBTF, 2013; Wiggins, 2015), which do

not adequately engage, and subsequently prepare learners for post-secondary independence and agency.

Both secondary school and post-secondary learner agency for managing their own learning, career, continuing education, and self-determining goals are enhanced when learners' needs for engagement, motivation, and voice during their secondary school experience are addressed (Conley & French, 2012; Knowledge Loom, 2009; Kohn, 1993 & 1999; McCombs, 2012; Rickabaugh, 2012; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012). Accordingly, preparing learners to leave home upon high school graduation as independent adults requires secondary school opportunities to exercise autonomy, demonstrate competency, and activate agency (Bandura, 1991 & 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1985; McCombs, 2012; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012). Although individual educational constructs of engagement, motivation, and voice contribute to the development of independent and interdependent secondary school learners, it is the powerful results these educational constructs hold in tandem which encourages the attention of educators to scaffold and build on them together (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Rickabaugh, 2015; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Chapter Three Inquiry Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice of the decline in student engagement from the perceptions of secondary school learners as they proceed throughout their educational experience. “Students need a voice, not a survey” (as cited in Yazzie-Mintz, 2010), stated one national student engagement study participant. As such, a qualitative research methodological approach was used in this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), to give voice to learners concerning the decline of student engagement during their secondary school experience.

The use of a qualitative research approach to verify learners’ perceptions is grounded in the belief that “qualitative studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes” (Glesne, 2011, p. 39). Furthermore, the purpose of a phenomenological qualitative research approach is to understand, gain insight into, and describe the essence of some phenomenon by capturing the common experience of the phenomenon among a group of research participants (Crotty, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Subsequently, meaning is constructed out of the shared experience of the group (Crotty, 1998; Van Manen, 1990).

According to Crotty (1998), this “reaching out into” (p. 44) the objects of our research infers an intimate relationship of intentionality between the researcher and the objects of his study. Therefore, utilizing a phenomenology methodological approach empowered the development of my consciousness towards a particular phenomenon in the school, family, and community contexts, or why things are the way they are (Crotty, 1998). Guided by this methodology, the following research questions directed this study.

1. How do learners describe their experiences of engagement at school and in the classroom?
2. How do classroom-level factors influence or affect learners' experiences of engagement?
3. How do school-level factors influence or affect learners' experiences of engagement?
4. How do family and community level factors influence or affect learners' experiences of engagement?

This chapter on inquiry methods included the rationale for the study, the problem setting context, the research sample and data sources, data collection and data analysis methods, research trustworthiness and ethical stance, and limitations and delimitations.

Rationale

Out of familiar and intimate interaction with contextual phenomena, meaning can be constructed (constructivism) concerning student engagement by research participants and researchers (Maxwell, 1998). According to Maxwell (1998), there are multiple purposes for conducting qualitative educational research; one being the practical purpose of answering the research questions (Maxwell, 1998; Polkinghorne, 2005). Therefore, the practical purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify how learners describe their experiences of student engagement and to understand the possible factors contributing to student engagement from the voices of learners. By seeking to comprehend learners' experiences of student engagement in a secondary school setting, a significant understanding of how to develop learner-centered environments (conceptual framework) was enhanced.

The purpose of phenomenological inquiry methods is to capture an understanding of the stories and lived experiences of the research participants in the field (Seidman, 2013). The data

generated from the phenomenological methodology enabled me to understand and interpret the engagement of learners from their perspective as the “experts of their own experiences” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 114). Creswell (2012) noted that the type of problem phenomenological research is designed to understand is “one in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon” (p. 60). Phenomenology as a methodology seeks in-depth insights of the participants’ experiences and interpretations of those experiences towards the goal of meaning-making (Maxwell, 1998).

Furthermore, a primary tenant of a qualitative research paradigm is its iterative, recursive, reflexive, and emergent nature (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Acknowledging the interrelatedness and interdependence of research questions, research design, data collection methods, data analysis, and data conclusions is at the heart of an integrated qualitative research design (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 1998; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Utilizing such complexity in research design (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), facilitates data generation likely to “provide evidence for the experience it is investigating” (Polkinghorne, 2005).

An iterative approach in qualitative research means revisiting the phenomenon under study multiple times by the researcher and research participants to ensure rich data collection, understanding, and interpretation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A recursive approach to qualitative research involves seeking an understanding of how each component of an integrative research design builds upon all the other elements (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 1998; Ravitch & Carl, 2016); while reflexivity is the intentional self-awareness of the researcher to their research roles, identity, positionality, and contributions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Emergence in qualitative research refers to the evolution of the research design while the study is ongoing, as well as the constructing of critical understandings from the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Therefore, Maxwell (1998) summarizes three advantages of conducting qualitative research for understanding the meaning of research participants' experiences, contexts, processes, events, and influences:

1. Generating results and theories that are understandable and experientially credible, both to the people studied and to others.
2. Conducting formative studies, ones that are intended to help improve existing practice rather than merely to determine the outcomes of the program or practice under investigation.
3. Engaging in collaborative, action, or "empowerment" research with practitioners or research participants. (Maxwell, 1998, p. 76)

Problem Setting/Context

The context for this study was a large, rural public school district located in Missouri. The district has been a K-12 district for 103 years, preceded by a country district of several individual K-8 schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The focus of the study was the junior high, consisting of grades seven and eight, and high school, consisting of grades nine through twelve.

Of the 427 middle-level public schools in the state of Missouri, this rural junior high is one of 54 junior high schools listed as a middle level school; while the remaining 373 listed middle-level schools are designated as middle schools in the Missouri public schools directory. The high school in this study is one of 583 public high schools in the Missouri public schools directory. The district has a school calendar of 174 pupil days and 183 teacher days.

The junior high has an enrollment of 726 students, 80.2% White, 11.8% Hispanic, 2.6% Black, 2.6% Multi-Race, 1.5% Asian, 1.2% Indian, .1% Pacific Islander, and 54.7% Free and

Reduced Lunch. The high school has an enrollment of 1385 students, with 80.9% White, 10.3% Hispanic, 3.2% Multi-Race, 1.9% Asian, 1.9% Black, Indian 1.4%, Pacific Islander .3%, and 50.3% Free and Reduced Lunch.

The junior high had a five-year annual attendance rate of 94.8% and the high school a five-year annual attendance rate of 94.4%, compared to the five-year average annual Missouri public secondary school attendance rate of 78.8%. The high school had a five-year graduation rate of 96.1%, compared to the Missouri five-year graduation rate of 85.7%. The high school had a 21.8% composite ACT score for the 2014-15 school year, compared to the Missouri composite ACT score for the 2014-15 school year of 21.6%. The junior high had a total discipline incident rate of 1.84 incidents for every 100 students, while the high school had an overall discipline incident rate of 5.12 incidents for every 100 students.

The junior high teachers' average years of experience is 13.6 and the high school teachers' average years of experience is 14.2. The junior high had 45.8% of teachers with a master's degree or higher and the high school had 54.8% of teachers with a master's degree or higher. The junior high had a 21:1 student to classroom teacher ratio and a 294:1 student to school administrator ratio. The high school had a 23:1 student to classroom teacher ratio and a 308:1 student to school administrator ratio. The school district is the 40th largest school district in the state of Missouri.

As principal of the junior high, I have taken two seventh grade and two eighth grade junior high student of the month recipients out to eat over the school lunch hour each month for the last seven years to celebrate their recognition. Students of the month are dually honored, needing first to be nominated by their teachers to be placed on the monthly ballot, then secondly, required to receive one of the top two numbers of votes per grade level from their school-wide

peers. Teachers and learners alike are reminded monthly of the criteria for the student of the month selection, students who demonstrate a consistent academic focus and effort, involvement in school activities, and a commitment to personal character development. During the celebration luncheons, I have asked learners a series of questions to give them a voice for continuous school improvement.

Regular feedback items I have observed in response to the prompt, “One thing I would change about school is...” have centered on student engagement. The most consistently repeated feedback loop responses have included boredom with school, questioning the value of what is taught in the classroom in relation to the real world, and the desire to have more choice in determining what they as students want to learn about. Furthermore, with two of my children of attending the junior high and high school in the research setting, regular conversations occurred with multiple students who were guests in our home as friends of our children. When asked how these former junior high learners high school experiences were going, normative feedback loop responses also centered on student engagement. Consistent and repeated response items from my own children and their peers included a lack of passion and excitement by teachers for what they were teaching, the lack of time to delve deeper into questions about their learning due to the need to hurry up and prepare for end of year tests, and school being more about grades and credits than about learning.

One of the shared collaboration norms of professional learning communities for this district’s secondary school research setting is caring to confront each other as educators with current present realities. As I cared to confront junior high teachers with the student feedback loop experiences at school collaboration meetings or annual school leadership retreats, and with high school teachers and administrators at district vertical collaboration meetings, I asked fellow

educators to share if they were observing similar phenomena with student engagement. Both junior high and high school teachers concurred they regularly observed concerns with student engagement as a lack of passion and effort towards learning in their classes, a sense of not taking learning seriously by failing to meet deadlines, and a lack of depth in the quality of assignments turned in by students.

Research Sample and Data Sources

A sample in a research study is the source of information from which knowledge is gained about a particular topic. According to Mason (2002), data sources fall into several categories, including, people, objects, settings, events, organizations, and texts. In a phenomenological study, the experiences or *phenomena* of sampled individuals and what they perceive about those experiences are under investigation (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, criterion sampling was essential for this study, purposefully selecting learners who have experienced the phenomena of a decline in student engagement (Creswell, 2013). As a local insider with a reflexive relationship with learners, their families, and educators within the context of the problem of practice, such purposeful sampling was appropriate for a phenomenological study (Maxwell, 1998).

Therefore, to accomplish the goal of collecting qualitatively rich data for constructing meaning out of the lived experience of a decline in student engagement among secondary school learners, I selected 12 learners who met the following criteria. First, they must have been in the 7th through 12th grades of their school experience. Secondly, they must have self-identified as having experienced a decline in student engagement at school, as revealed in a research study screening interview. Lastly, they must have self-identified as a regular participant in at least one school extra-curricular activity and one community youth organization (Boys & Girls Club,

faith-based group, youth club sports team, 4-H Club, etc.). The purpose of such criterion sampling was to gain an accurate description of the phenomena of student engagement among secondary school learners across multiple socio-ecological contexts.

The learners were arranged in groups of six, a junior high group (7-8), a high school sophomore group (10) and a junior group (11), with each group interviewed twice as separate focus groups to provide a “window” view of the phenomena (Koerber & McMichael, 2008, p. 462). Also, the three interviews series (Seidman, 2013) was conducted with all 12 individual research participants. Within a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol, I piloted and asked focused questions designed to elicit student voice regarding their lived experiences of a decline in student engagement during their secondary school experience.

Following all research protocols approved by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board assisted in the protection of individuals purposefully selected for this qualitative research study. Since most of the research participants were minors, considered a vulnerable research population, parent and minor research participants’ consent were both secured before conducting the study. Research study participants received the option to remove themselves from a focus group or individual interview at any time, or from the entire study process, without ramifications. I paid close attention to the selection of familiar and comfortable focus group, individual interview, and written expression settings to facilitate authentic data collection from learners. Lastly, I utilized an inquiry research stance with myself as the primary research instrument to maintain a respectful rapport with each student research participant.

Data Collection Methods

A qualitative data collection plan, involving focus group and individual interviews as well as observations, field work, critical incident memos, and narrative writing samples (Ravitch

& Carl, 2016; Van Manen, 1990), was implemented to capture qualitative participants' voices concerning their experiences of student engagement. A qualitative approach to data collection facilitated the type of authentic and "intensive exploration" (Polkinghorne, 2005) which promotes data as "generated and co-constructed," rather than merely collected (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Achieving an understanding of junior high and high school participants' view of classroom, school, and family/community factors which relate to student engagement was important in this phenomenological study.

Data were collected from the participants who experienced a decline in student engagement by means of semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions; classroom, school, and community youth organization site observations; and written narratives (Busey & Russell, 2016; Creswell, 2012). A triangulated approach to data collection was helpful for capturing the essence of the phenomena of the decline in student engagement of secondary school learners (Van Manen, 1990). Providing multiple means of expression allowed learners the opportunity to personalize their responses, with some likely to prefer verbal expression while others prefer written expression (Busey & Russell, 2016).

A qualitative research design is supported by Moustakas (1994), who asserts focus groups and individual interviews are a conversation between people in a trusting and relaxed atmosphere. The conversations within the focus groups and individual interviews of secondary school learners were based on capturing the personal stories, critical incidents, and processes participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Seidman, 2013) have encountered in secondary school, classroom, and family/community settings regarding student engagement. Additional observation time in research participants' school or community based settings allowed insights into daily local learning environments and family/community dynamics by noting the various

instructional strategies and relationship interactions occurring with each research participant (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Focus groups have the advantage of helping researchers gain insight into a wide range of participants' thought processes in a relatively short amount of time (Morgan, 1996). Individual interviews with participants can investigate thoughts and experiences in more depth, as well as attend to the connections between personal experiences over a period of time (Seidman, 2013). Narrative writing provided a third avenue for capturing the essence of the phenomena by affording learners the opportunity for written expression of their perceptions, thoughts, and opinions concerning their experiences of student engagement (Van Manen, 1990). Making use of focus groups, individual interviews, and narrative writing added to the richness of the data collection and analysis process performed for this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The focus group and individual interview sessions took place during the school day or after school in a principal designated classroom or conference room setting conducive to a natural and comfortable setting for the learners.

The first individual interview in each of the three interview series (Seidman, 2013) was an opportunity for the researcher and research participant to build rapport, understand the purpose, scope, and sequence of the research process, and allow the research participant to ask any questions he or she may have about the study. The second interview was the first semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) and the introduction of the narrative writing sample and timeline for its completion. The third interview was for follow-up questioning of the narrative writing sample (Appendix D), allowing the research participant to clarify meaning of their written expression of the phenomenon of student engagement so it is not misinterpreted or

undervalued (Busey & Russell, 2016). The third interview also allowed for follow-up of open ended questions which emerged as a result of the study.

For the purposes of enhancing trustworthiness, validity, credibility, skillfulness, and integrity (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016) with knowledge generation, triangulation was sought to gain multiple perspectives of emerging knowledge. Conducting two focus groups sessions and three individual interviews with all of the purposefully selected focus group members, while also including observation and field notes and written narrative descriptions of learners' perceptions of student engagement, helped provide methodological triangulation for this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Utilizing such an approach for understanding the phenomena of student engagement helped generate a robust data set (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) and assisted in protecting against researcher bias and simplistic conclusions. According to Herr and Anderson (2015), such process validity also contributes to what qualifies as evidence to support research claims and an overall ethical research stance in relationship with study participants.

Permission to conduct this study in the junior high and high school of the field district was obtained from the district's superintendent of schools. Permission to observe and interact with learners at community organization sites was obtained from gatekeepers of the separate community organizations. Permission to interact with research participants in the local setting was also obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Arkansas. An invitation letter and informed consent form was given to each participant and their parent or guardian, in the case of minors.

Given that interviewing and observation of participants are appropriate methods for qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), I took on the participant interviewer and observer

roles with this study. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), researchers are the primary research instrument in a qualitative study, requiring an active role by the interviewer and observer in creating focus group and individual “rapport based on a sense of shared understanding and empathy” (Davies & Dodd, 2002). Therefore, within my role as the interviewer, I created focus group question prompts and individual interview protocol question prompts (Appendices B & D) to generate and guide group discussion and dialogue. I also provided narrative writing prompts (Appendix D) to elicit rich data responses from participants for collection and analysis. Through rapport and mutual respect building, I assisted research participants in clarifying their thought processes with follow-up questions for an in-depth interview process (Seidman, 2013).

Likewise, within my role as observer, I sought potential interaction with research participants with permission from school administration, classroom teacher, and community organization gatekeepers. Participant interaction and observation in school hallways, classrooms, cafeterias, school activities, students’ social gathering places, and community organization locations and events was unobtrusive and accepted due to my natural presence on campus as the junior high principal in the school district where my study was conducted. Taking the opportunity to observe learners in their natural school and community group settings and compose critical research memos assisted in performing a rigorous study.

Data Analysis Methods

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), qualitative data analysis refers to the “intentional, systematic scrutiny of data at various stages and moments throughout the research process” (p. 217). Making sense of qualitatively generated data (Creswell, 2012; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Seidman, 2013) relies on iteratively, reflexively, and transparently integrating data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation in overlapping cycles (Maxwell,

1988; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Creswell (2012) notes sense making in qualitative research involves utilizing a spiraling analytical process, touching and revisiting the data in various rotations throughout the research process. Planning for such intentionality and transparency with the process of scrutinizing data enables researchers, participants, and readers to clearly understand how findings and interpretations were derived (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Guba and Lincoln (1985) denote the naturalistic inquiry processes of data collection as the construction of meaning of a lived experience by the continuous interaction between researcher(s) and research participants; and data analysis as the “reconstruction of those constructions” (p. 332). Therefore, to construct and reconstruct the meaning and essence of student engagement of secondary school learners in a large, rural Missouri school district, continuous interaction between the researcher and the generated data were required. According to Seidman (2013), the transitory nature of lived experiences necessitates such looking and looking again to make sense of phenomena through the reconstruction of the lived experience.

According to Moustakas (1994), the first step in phenomenological data analysis is bracketing. Bracketing is the intentional act of setting aside of the researcher’s pre-judgments of the phenomena under investigation in order to optimally understand the lived experiences of the phenomena by the study participants. Therefore, in my study on the problem of the decline of student engagement of secondary school learners, this meant intentionally suspending all prior learning from personal experience and the literature review of the engagement construct to allow the voices of learners to speak clearly about their own lived experiences of engagement in school (Englander, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

I accomplished this goal of suspending, although not eliminating (Gilbert, 2007), my prior learning with the construct by employing the qualitative task of research journaling

(Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Immediately upon completion of individual and focus group interviews, narrative writing readings, and site-based observations, I found a distraction free environment to write down my immediate perceptions of what learners shared as a sort of “self-correcting interview” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 164). By making notes of the potential importance of data obtained from research participants, whether for creating future follow-up questions, flagging my own potential bias, or documenting emerging themes, I was more likely to capture the essence of what research respondents communicated as their authentic lived experience of the phenomenon and suspend any researcher interpretation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The second step in phenomenological data analysis is employing horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) as an appropriate means for answering the study’s research questions. According to Moustakas (1994), horizontalization is the reduction of research responses from the full interview transcription to a focus on the qualities of the lived experience. As such, I listed and ascribed equal value to every significant statement from the full manuscript which was related to student engagement. Moustakas (1994) suggests a continual focus on the phenomena under investigation reveals the “essential nature” (p. 91) of the phenomena. Van Manen (1990) regards such phenomenological inquiry of lived experiences as the human process of mining for meaning.

Utilizing Moustakas’ (1994) reduction analysis of phenomenological data, the initial data analysis steps were (1) Listing and grouping “every expression relevant to the experience” (pg. 120) [in this case, engagement], from the full transcription of each interview; followed by (2) “testing each expression for two requirements” (p. 120):

- a) Did it contain a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?

b) Was it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it was considered a horizon of the experience. Expressions not meeting the above requirements are eliminated.

Overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions are also eliminated or presented in more exact descriptive terms. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience (p. 121).

Individual textual description coding (Moustakas, 1994) of verbatim examples from the transcripts were categorized as horizon experiences of the research participants. If any of the coded themes were not explicitly found in the interview transcriptions or narrative writings, those themes were not retained as horizon experiences of the research participants. To help ensure authenticity of meaning from the horizon experiences, research participant member checking was also conducted with interview and narrative writing manuscripts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Finally, the third step in phenomenological data analysis was the clustering of the horizon experiences into themed units of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). I utilized composite description coding (Moustakas, 1994) to cluster and code the horizon experiences as the authentic core themes of the lived experiences of student engagement by secondary school research participants from my study. Specifically, In Vivo and Process coding methods were both be employed with the interview transcriptions for staying true to the participants lived experience, and catching the action orientation of the interview narrative (Saldana, 2016). Both In Vivo and Process coding methods aligned with my learner-centered conceptual framework, seeking to understand the constructed meaning of student engagement from the perception of learners themselves.

Checking of the coded themes against the full transcriptions of research participant focus group

and individual interviews was undertaken as a final step of application validation (Moustakas, 1994).

Furthermore, considering research participants as “co-researchers” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95) was a significant assertion during this study that participants’ expressions of their lived experiences and their involvement in making meaning out of student engagement, was the focus of this study. This was another valuable step in validating a learner-centered conceptual framework. However, research participants’ identity as co-researchers in this study was limited to the recognition of their shared power in contributing their lived experience of student engagement in school. Member checking of transcriptions for accuracy of meaning (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) was their only contribution beyond participating in their focus group or individual interviews.

Validity as an active methodological process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) involves following Guba and Lincoln’s (1985) naturalistic and constructivist approach to inquiry to capture the authenticity of research participants’ experiences. Although complete trustworthiness in qualitative research “can never be fully ensured” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 187), being transparent and intentional about my data collection and analysis protocol ensured quality, rigor, and trustworthiness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The intentional connection between the use of phenomenological methodology, purposeful sampling, and integrative data collection and data analysis was best suited to answer the research questions and understand the lived experience of student engagement of secondary school learners in a large, rural Missouri school district.

Trustworthiness

Smith (as cited in Ravitch & Carl, 2016) contended the historical outcomes of research have been lopsided when stating, “Research in itself is a powerful intervention...which has

traditionally benefited the researcher and the knowledge base of the dominant group in society.” In contrast, taking a relational approach to research denotes an inherent ownership of core values such as honesty, inquiry, openness, and empathy by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Seeking to understand and stay true to others’ lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994) is at the heart of trustworthiness in qualitative research and therefore, the entirety of the research experience is aimed at establishing equitable relationships between the researcher and research participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Trustworthiness is central to the research process, both internally and externally. A significant threat to the trustworthiness of a qualitative study is the misrepresentation of the voice of the research participants. The welfare of participants depends on the accurate representation of their lived experience, as does the overall credibility of the study. Therefore, in qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the practices and processes researchers employ to remain authentic to participants’ lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The relational nature of qualitative research necessitates the importance of what Ravitch and Carl noted (2016) as “beneficence” (p. 347) and “internal-facing transparency” (p. 363). Internal-facing research participants in this study are the 14 learners who have lived the experience of student engagement. Research participants agreed to share their familiarity with a particular phenomenon via an individual interview or as part of a focus group because of their desire to contribute generative knowledge towards transformational action (Cho & Trent, 2006, as cited in Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research was essential for capturing the essence of the phenomena of student engagement as experienced by the internal-facing research participants.

The external-facing research audience for this study were the chair and professors which make up my dissertation committee. The long-term external-facing research audience for this study will be inquirers and researchers of all varieties interested in student learner engagement, motivation, and voice. Without fidelity to the lived experience of learners and the authenticity of their voices concerning student engagement, the credibility of the overall study would be lost for external facing audiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

I addressed these threats by making available the transcriptions of the audio recorded interviews for dialogic engagement and collaboration with the research participants. Sharing power with research participants by providing the transcriptions for their review supported the authenticity of their voice and lived experience. Also, empowering participants with the ability to strike any portion of the interview which they are uncomfortable, led to trustworthy generative knowledge (Maxwell, 1998 & 2005). Also, research constructs such as:

- The Internal Review Board (IRB) of the University of Arkansas,
- The Graduate School of Education's Ethics Committee,
- A researcher personal code of ethics,
- Securing informed consent and permission of participants and their parent/guardians to record interview sessions and maintain confidentiality of the research participants' identities,
- Submitting a University of Arkansas research proposal protocol which articulates following an iterative research design process attuned to the fidelity of research participants lived experience, over any specific methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2016),
- Attention to criticality, the logical connections between theoretical, conceptual, contextual, and methodological research processes (Ravitch & Carl, 2016),

- Attention to reflexivity, how the separate aspects of an integrated qualitative research paradigm continually relate with and impact each other (Maxwell, 1998),
- Attention to collaboration, the reciprocal nature of influence and power between the researcher and research participants to prevent the hierarchical role of expert researcher over the role of being a fellow learner (Ravitch & Carl, 2016),
- Attention to rigor in horizontal research relationships and processes, meaning finding the balance between original research design and an emerging need for flexibility in response to research participants lived experiences of the phenomena of student engagement (Ravitch & Carl, 2016),
- Attention to dialogical exchange, an intentional set of relationships with critical friends and feedback specialists to solidify research authenticity (Saldana, 2016), and
- Attention to data management in the form of immediate writing of research memos after conducting research interviews, will all serve as the building blocks for the establishment of trustworthiness in the research process.

While trustworthiness can never be absolutely ensured (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), the implementation of the aforementioned practices with research participants established an ethical research stance. Such “external-facing transparency,” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 363) addressed the threats to trustworthiness, such as research bias and assumptions, which the research audiences required and deserved if my work was to be deemed credible. On this point, Crotty (1998, p. 2) put forward the epistemological questions that observers of research will ask:

1. How should the outcomes laid out be regarded?
2. Why should these outcomes be taken seriously?

Following the prescribed ethical research stance assisted in the presentation of “liberating, sustainable, and democratizing outcomes” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 149).

While “walking naked into the land of uncertainty” (Quinn, 1996) seemed daunting, my commitment to flexibility over control, to honoring research participants’ funds of knowledge as “essential in constructing change that will uniquely impact and benefit them” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 152), and to confronting the “dynamic conservatism” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 152) of my context, ensured a greater certainty of beneficence for internal-facing research participants (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Research conducted within one’s own professional field is a trustworthiness issue in itself. Therefore, adhering to the aforementioned theoretical, conceptual, and methodological trustworthiness constructs helped establish an ethical research stance toward research participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Finally, to further address threats to research trustworthiness and integrity (Herr & Anderson, 2015) with knowledge generation, data triangulation was sought to gain multiple perspectives of emerging knowledge. Data triangulation is the intentional inclusion of diverse approaches for observing and learning about a research phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The inclusion of individual interviews in addition to focus groups provided methodological triangulation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) for understanding the phenomenon of student engagement. Adding data triangulation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) tools of observations and field notes provided additional sources of student engagement data and protected against researcher bias and simplistic conclusions. Employing these various lenses generated multiple data sources as an attempt to find common interpretative themes for understanding the phenomenon of student engagement (Creswell, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Limitations and Delimitations

This study has a number of limitations and delimitations. The data collected was from a limited and specific population of one school district. By limiting the scope of research to a small sample of learners, I sought to gain richer data of the phenomenon of secondary school student engagement. The limited scope was intended to maintain alignment and fidelity to the research design, questions, and goals of my study.

Additionally, the participants who currently or formerly attended the junior high and high school of the research district were not randomly selected. Instead, it was a delimitation to purposefully select learners who could speak specifically to behavioral, cognitive, and psychological student engagement from the perspective of criterion-based selected learners. This was a limitation to the final research results of this study in that I was not using a randomly selected sample of learners who represented the entire student population, such as special education learners, second-language learners, and academically at-risk learners.

Another limitation was my position as a professional educator with the school district. The current insider relationships I maintain with research participants could have resulted in the likelihood of participants telling me what I wanted to hear as a researcher. A research study limitation was my assumption that all research participants would be truthful with their responses. Therefore, steps were taken to promote objectivity and reduce researcher and participant bias in the field of study.

One such step was maintaining a neutral tone when interacting with research participants during focus group or individual interview sessions. For example, upholding a posture of equitable inquiry with all of the research participants within a focus group by calling upon each participant was assumed to lead to broader, more authentic findings. Another step to promote

researcher objectivity was the ongoing reflection of my research position of power and maintaining an ethical stance by research journaling and memo writing immediately after research sessions.

Lastly, the interpretive analysis of research notes and coding from the individual interview and focus group sessions might have involved researcher conscious or unconscious bias which could interfere with trustworthy results (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Growing up in the Midwest, where the dominant political culture is moralistic and conservative in nature, I was heavily influenced by the notion of individual accountability. However, I was also significantly affected by the assumption that institutional and governmental interventions are an effective means for promoting equity and fairness in the interest of the public good. This latter influence has led to my general support of activism and school reform efforts based upon credible research and community collaboration as an effective means to improve public education. The purpose of stating these limitations was to provide ethical transparency to my researcher background. This and other stated limitations were addressed by critical engagement with the research participants and the dissertation chair.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the decline in student engagement from the perspective of secondary school learners as they proceeded throughout their educational experience. Careful attention was made to establish an inquiry related research stance with the overall research design to ensure criticality throughout the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Such intentional and on-going researcher reflection assisted me in recursively aligning the qualitative paradigm and phenomenological methodology with the research questions and conceptual framework concerning the phenomenon of student engagement.

I understood my role as researcher made me the primary research instrument (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this qualitative study, phenomenology was used to give voice to learners' lived experience of student engagement in their secondary school experience. My research focused on drawing out learners' voices regarding the meaning of the phenomenon of student engagement through use of the epistemological lens of constructivism.

Chapter Four Presentation of the Data and Discussion

Introduction

This dissertation in practice (Perry, 2012), qualitatively explored a purposeful sample of junior and high school student learners' perceptions regarding the phenomenon of student engagement during their secondary school experience. A phenomenological approach was used to capture an understanding of the stories of secondary school student learners (Seidman, 2013), from their perspective as the "experts of their own experiences" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 114). By engaging secondary school students in the process of meta-cognition with a multi-dimensional and socio-ecological view of engagement, 15 learners participated in focus group and individual interviews as well as provided written responses to multiple question prompts, to relate how they experienced engagement within secondary school and classroom environments, at home, and in the community.

By conducting focus group and individual interviews, I mined for the meaning of student engagement from the lived experiences of five junior high eighth graders, five high school sophomores, and five high school juniors, through a naturalistic and qualitative inquiry process of data collection. This process was designed to tap and be true to the voices of student learners concerning their own and others' perceived levels of engagement in secondary school, classroom, home, and community settings, as "perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 44). In this chapter, I present the findings that address the study's research questions:

1. How do secondary school learners describe their perceptions of engagement at school and in the classroom?
2. How do classroom-level factors influence or affect learners' experiences of engagement?

3. How do school-level factors influence or affect learners' experiences of engagement?
4. How do family and community-level factors influence or affect learners' experiences of engagement?

Research group members participated in an initial individual rapport-building interview, which included developing a learner profile of each research participant. Next, the secondary student learners participated in their first focus group, followed by a second individual interview, then the second focus group, and finally, the third individual interview and the administration of writing prompts to secure a written reflection of student learners' perceptions of engagement. Afterward, I analyzed the focus group and individual interview transcripts and writing prompt samples to extract exact quotes representative of student learners' perceptions of engagement. The voices of learners were regarded as those who spoke clearly about their own lived experiences of engagement in school, in the classroom, at home, and in the community (Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2016; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

To complete the meaning-making process, I clustered the learners' perceptions and experiences under the four research questions and the four themed rungs on the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C). During this process, the individual research participants' responses took on less importance in view of the shared meaning which emerged from the collective perceptions of research participants. Phenomenological research purposes to develop a composite description of the essence of the experience from all of the individuals (Smith, 2016). This description consists of what they experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994), ultimately providing an understanding of the collective experiences of the participants as well as to look for relationships between the categories of shared meanings for possible theory development (Saldana, 2016; Smith, 2016).

Finally, the research study results are context specific in they depict the range of ways in which 14 to 18-year-old secondary school learners from a large, rural Missouri school district described the phenomenon of engagement as they participated in focus groups, individual interviews, and responded in writing to the provided prompts. I iteratively reviewed the content of 662 pages of transcribed data, analyzing the perceptions of 14 learners' engagement levels (one male high school sophomore dropped out of the study due to personal reasons after the first individual interview), moving from concrete codes to abstract themes of meaning (see Figure 6). The process of moving from the peculiar data to the conceptual and theoretical essence of the phenomenon of student engagement (Saldana, 2016) was painstakingly slow but extremely important to protect the integrity of the voices of the research participants and the trustworthiness of the overall study.

A brief demographic review of the secondary school research participants reveals the intent for this purposefully selected sample; that due to the high value and esteem bestowed by the school district upon learners involved in school activities, understanding this particular group's perception of student engagement across multiple ecologies could facilitate district stakeholders' attention towards the importance of engaging all district student learners.

Table 2
Research Participant Demographics

Research Participant Demographics	8 th graders	Sophomores	Juniors	Total Average
Attendance Rate	98.16%	97.83%	92.94%	96.31%
G.P.A.	3.96	3.98	3.77	3.90
# of School Activity Groups Involved	4.6 per student learner	3.25 per student learner	5.2 per student learner	4.5 activities per student learner
F/R Lunch Status	1 of 5	1 of 4	1 of 5	14%

As the data collection process proceeded, I was impressed by the intensity and integrity of the secondary school learners as they poured out their thoughts and perceptions of student engagement. The learners spoke passionately about their states of experience during their learning opportunities, which reflected who they are and what they do in relationship with their teachers, peers and classmates, parents, coaches, and other adults; with the content and curriculum of their classes; and with their various school, home, and community environments. I was also struck by the sheer readiness of the research participants to so willingly talk about their experiences of learning at school, at home, and in the community. Student learners shared no real hesitancy to open up and be comfortable with sharing their experiences of engagement, finding it quite natural to give voice to their perceived level of engagement based on the Continuum of Engagement used in this study (Appendix C).

The student learners spoke boldly about their perceptions of highly engaging learning experiences, such as when Peter said,

I prefer working in groups and I like the idea of all of us doing class activities altogether, rather than just like small busy work or something, or you just get to work and just do it by yourself. I feel like that really got students connected by sharing their thinking.

Conversely, student learners were also bluntly honest concerning their indifference with a lack of engagement in many classroom environments. An example of this type of experience was Cindy speaking about her year in a History class:

I hate it. It's really boring. I feel, I don't know, I was surprised that he even knew half of our names at the end of the year, because you never interact with him at all. So, yeah and it's really hard because this is my first hour. So it's really hard to stay awake.

I represented the secondary school research participants word for word except when further explanation was needed by insertion of parenthesized terminology. Redundant use of transition words such as "like," "you know," and other slang, were generally eliminated for a

smoother and more enjoyable reading experience. It was critical for me to represent with great accuracy the voices of the learners who participated in this study to gain a deeper understanding of the perceived meaning of their experiences (Saldana, 2016). By honoring the voices of adolescent learners, I was “more likely to capture the meanings inherent in people’s experience” (Saldana, 2016, p. 106).

Research Question One Results

How do secondary school learners describe their perceptions of engagement at school and in the classroom?

My data analysis of the triangulated responses of student learners from focus group and individual interviews as well as individual writings samples revealed important findings concerning student engagement at the school and classroom levels. While learners stated they were engaged in school through their relationships with friends, teammates, teachers, coaches, and sponsors and by their involvement in school activities, the research participants also revealed a majority of their classroom experiences were at the lower rungs of the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C), classifying them as mostly compliant. Secondary school learners described the most substantial parts of their classroom experiences as sitting, listening, following directions from teachers, taking notes, taking quizzes, taking tests, and generally not talking about their learning.

On the other hand, learners indicated the better relationship they had with a teacher, the higher their level of engagement was in the classroom. Student learners also reported that higher levels of engagement occurred when teachers exhibited an evident passion about their subject area content, chose to interact with the learners, and demonstrated they cared about and took an interest in who learners were and how they were doing in other areas besides the academic

content area of the class. Also, student learners expressed higher engagement occurred when teachers gave learners freedom to choose what or how they wanted to learn within the classroom, and when learners could see a purpose and relevance for learning beyond it counting for a quiz, test, grade, or as course credit.

Research Question Two Results

How do classroom-level factors influence or affect learners' experiences of engagement?

Research participants shared that before they were involved in this study and familiar with the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C), they were conscious of when they were excited or bored in various classroom experiences, but didn't understand the nuances of engagement for actual learning. Now that learners had an understanding of engagement and its importance for learning, they stated they would be better able to monitor and regulate their engagement levels. However, student learners still believed significant responsibility for engagement resided in the control of the classroom teacher. Speaking on this shared responsibility for engagement, Carol stated,

It's like a relationship, you have to help each other basically. The teacher can't do it all on their own, because you have to work to be engaged. Once you find something that you're interested in, it will be easy to work and learn it, but you have to work as well, it can't just all be the teacher and it can't all just be you, because the teacher needs to help and support you.

Likewise, Jason summarized his perceptions of a teacher's responsibility to create an engaging classroom environment as follows:

Something I would say, plain and simple is don't make the class boring. Don't make it to where kids are just sitting down doing work, learning things, like learning it, not really learning it, just kind of memorizing it and then regurgitating it back out on a test. Don't make it to where that's the case in your classroom. You want it to where kids want to be in an environment, where they want to learn, and they want to be in that classroom instead of just sitting there and doing nothing and just trying to get a good grade in that classroom.

Research Question Three Results

How do school-level factors influence or affect learners' experiences of engagement?

Learners' perceptions of school-level factors which led to higher levels of engagement were autonomous opportunities to pursue interests of their choosing and having time to build relationships with caring adults who could guide and support them on their educational journey. When learners perceived they had little to no voice in their learning opportunities, they expressed their school experience was frustrating, boring, and draining. However, learners spoke passionately and positively about their school provided opportunities to belong and engage in school activities, whether on a sports team, in a performing arts group, or in an interest-based organization or club, where student learners had real input and responsibilities within their school experience.

Speaking of these type of school-wide opportunities, Cindy said,

On my dance team, I feel like I am helping out. I feel like I am important. I don't feel like I'm just like part of the team, I feel we're all -- I want to say like sisters, we're all kind of a big family and we all get along really well and so, I always feel I'm included and my opinion matters.

Research Question Four Results

How do family and community-level factors influence or affect learners' experiences of engagement?

Research participants perceived learning experiences at home and in the community as mostly situational and supportive. Whether through interaction with parents, siblings, or extended family, involvement with faith-based groups, club-sports or civic groups, or in workplace environments, secondary school learners described purposeful relationships within the home and community aimed at sustaining their personal growth and development. The adolescent learners perceived an emphasis on the learning of life lessons and life skills at the

family and community levels, which research participants described as natural, highly valuable, and enduring.

For example, Alice portrayed doing everyday chores around the house, such as laundry or washing the dishes as opportunities for personal responsibility and making a contribution. Erin shared how having the responsibility for cooking dinner for her and siblings when her mom and step-dad are gone in the evenings made it important for her to pay attention when her mom demonstrates learning how to cook. Alice also used the following story to explain the crucial importance of receiving parental feedback for learning life lessons. “My parents tell me if I did something dumb, and they feel like no, don't do that ever again because that's dumb, don't do that, because that will hurt you in life.” Equally, Greg illustrated a similar emphasis on life learning from his grandfather when working together on the family cattle ranch in Arkansas.

Helping out down there, feeding the cows...I think sometimes doing that and just finding out about, I guess...like my grandpa always calls it, ‘things every man should know how to do,’ like how to drive a stick, how to weld a fence back together, how to build a fence, stuff like that. That may not necessarily have an impact on my career, but it’s just nice to know and I know how to do it right then, without a worksheet or whatever.

Also, the research participants emphasized the importance of having time for inquiry-based opportunities at the family and community level for engaging in new learning. Ben illustrated this point at his church youth group when sharing, “You could ask whatever questions you wanted, even if it wasn’t like really pertaining to what we were talking about at the time, if it’s important to you, you could still ask and it would be answered.” Likewise, Greg highlighted when shadowing his dad on his construction jobs how he had the time and freedom to ask about anything he wanted, which he perceived as a significant contrast to learning in the classroom at school.

When I am going with my dad I can ask him whatever, he is super smart, he’s got an Economics degree, so he knows all about that stuff. So, I’ll get a news alert on my phone

or we'll hear something on the radio or something. And I'll be like, 'What is that?' And he'll explain it to me and I'll learn and know it right then without doing anything else to retain the information. I just know it and maybe it comes up again or maybe it doesn't, but it's still there. And I think with a classroom it's, I think the difference is now that I'm thinking about it is probably...If I'm asking my dad, or my grandpa, or my uncles something, I want to know, I mean I'm not going to ask something I don't care about, if I didn't care about it I wouldn't ask or say anything. And in school, it doesn't matter if you care about it or not you're going to learn it, whether you want to or not. So I think part of the difference is, I guess, maybe it's not what you're interested in, but what strikes your attention and what gets your brain moving and those cogs working.

Two Themes of Student Engagement

Two distinct themes and eight sub-category themes (Figure 6), of how learners' perceived engagement across multiple social ecologies surfaced from my data analysis. Each of these themes materialized through iteratively handling and reflecting upon the transcribed data from the voices of the secondary school student learners. Each of the themes and sub-themes identified in Figure 6 help answer the research questions. The themes are ordered by level of prevalence, but not necessarily their degree of importance, for how learners conceptualized engagement in secondary school, home, and community settings. Instead, the significance of each theme emerged from the perceptions communicated by student learners of what they deemed as purposeful and synergistic towards a more learning, learner-centered, and learner-driven experience. Lastly, due to the interrelatedness of the themes, some natural overlap exists within and among the themes.

Theme One: The Rung of Compliance as Engagement

The predominant theme that emerged in this dissertation in practice study was compliance as engagement in secondary school classrooms. Learners portrayed this as being required to complete teacher and curriculum-centered work for teacher and curriculum-centered learning goals or objectives, without any significant investment by the learners in such work. According to research participants, little meaningful or substantial learning occurred from the

completion of this type of work. My analysis of the hundreds of pages of transcribed interview and written response data revealed a total of 350+ horizon experiences of compliant

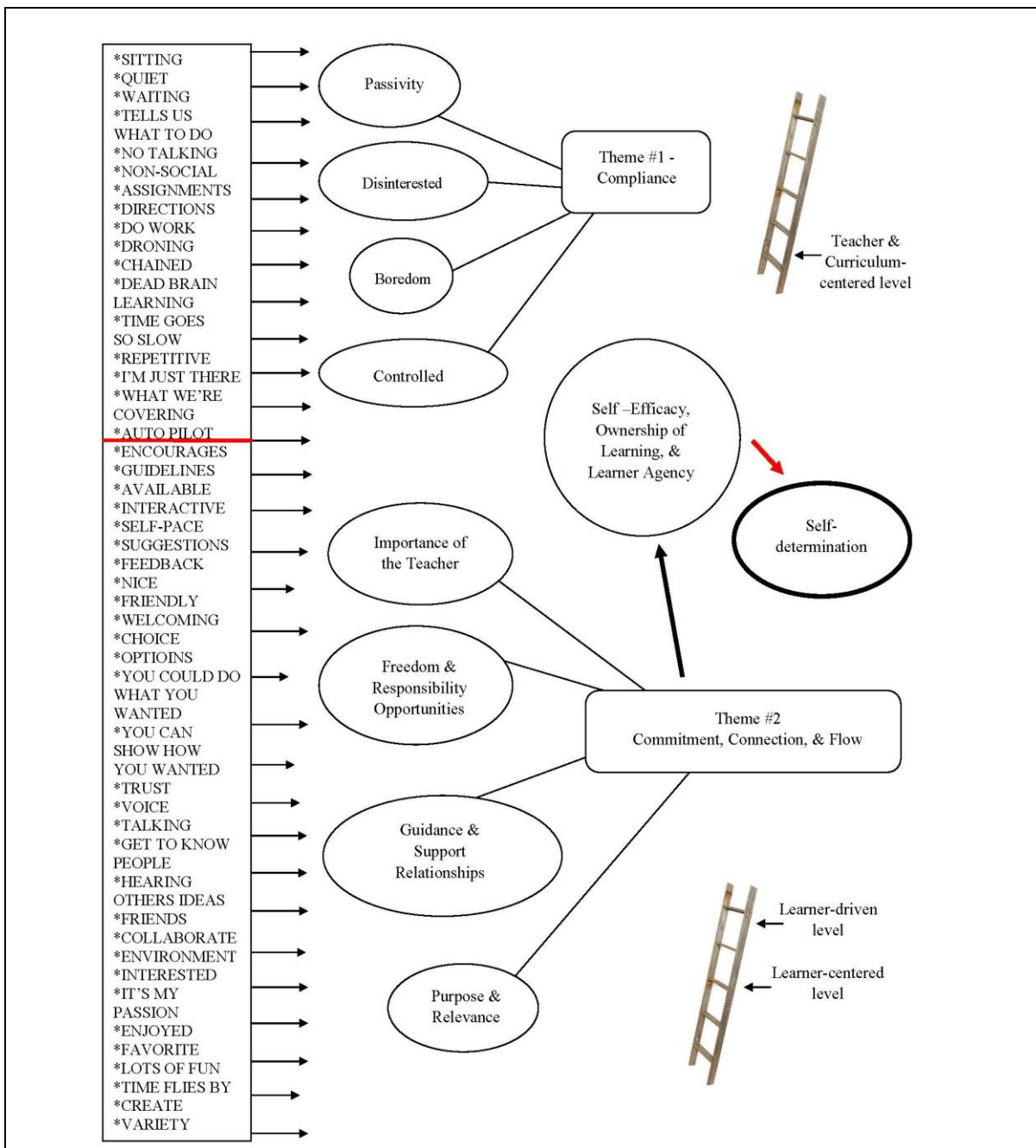


Figure 6. Graphic representation of the shared meaning and essence of engagement from the perceptions of secondary school learners in a large, rural Missouri school district.

levels of engagement, categorized into the four sub-themes of passivity, disinterested, boredom, and controlled (Figure 6).

At the compliant level of engagement, learners discussed dreading going to some classes, not because they couldn't understand the concepts or didn't have a connection with the teacher, but because they disliked the monotony and lack of relevance seen in many learning experiences. For example, Marcia stated,

I leave class going what did I just learn, what, what is this? Going through the motions, what's the purpose, how will this help me in life? Every day and so it's like very compliant. I've got a good relationship with the teacher but I don't know at this point it's just kind of hard going every day.

Likewise, Olivia summarizing her classroom experiences stated, "It's pretty compliant, like you take notes, and I mean you do learn, but you don't really." Olivia shared the following specific example from her Personal Finance class:

Every day, not every day, but at least every other day, we just watch Dave Ramsey videos and just take notes over it, and so I guess I've learned a lot, but we don't really do anything except for video, notes, test; video, notes, test. So it's like, you get really into like this rhythm and it's like you're just going through the movements by this point.

In speaking about classes which are required, but not necessarily important to learners, Jan reported, "Like sometimes I'm focused, sometimes I'm not, but I can get away with not focusing so that's like, why I don't engage myself if I don't have to, because I don't enjoy those subjects as much."

Many participants referred to compliance of completing homework assignments to achieve a good grade, spending time studying to get a good test score and the goal of passing a course to meet credit requirements for graduation. For example, John stated, "I'm just kind of focusing on passing this class, because then I'll get this credit to pass high school. Then after high school, I guess I'll have to figure out what college and everything else."

Also, research study participants admitted sometimes they faked learning had happened, while honestly acknowledging they had not learned anything. Cindy reflected on times when classmates were looking to her for clarity on what they should have learned, saying, “I honestly have no idea what I've been doing for the past two weeks. I don't know why you're asking me. I may look like I know what I'm doing, but I have no idea.”

Passivity. One prominent sub-category which described the meaning of the compliant theme of engagement was passivity within the regular classroom experience. Instead of active participation and partnership with teachers in setting and pursuing learning goals, all too often student learners expressed their lived experience in the classroom as one of passivity to teaching and curriculum-centered goals and activities. Student learners expressed they were uninvited to the planning process of their daily learning and expected to comply with teacher and curriculum pre-determined pathways. Descriptive norms of research participants included sitting, listening to and following directions, completing assignments, repetitive daily classroom practices, an anti-social environment, and covering the prescribed curriculum.

Research participants shared specific examples of these descriptions when replying to the following interview protocol questions. The first individual interview and focus group questions were, “Tell me as much as possible about what you actually do on a school day, from the time you wake-up, throughout your day at school, after school, and until you go asleep?” Next, the use of the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C) extended to the follow-up inquiry of, “Looking at the four various states of experience on the graphic representation of engagement, describe a class or classes which represent one or more of the states of engagement.” Lastly, I asked the student learners the following exploratory prompts:

1. What are you doing when you are in the compliant state of engagement in class?

2. What was that like for you?
3. Could you tell me a story or give an example of being in the compliant state of engagement?

As student learners moved into the experience of their daily class schedule at school, they began to describe the predominant occurrence of compliant passivity. For example, Mary said,

When you're in class, you're just sitting there, and it's going over your head and going through you, and then you leave, and you go to the next class. At some point, you just don't realize it's happening anymore, and that's just what happens. Slowly, you're just like, 'Okay, this is exactly how this is gonna go, so I'm gonna go with the flow, then I'm just going to have to deal with it.

Additionally, Cindy said, "He teaches it, and then we get a worksheet. And that's it. And nobody talks. And nobody asks questions. And if you don't get it, you just... you don't get it."

Furthermore, John described how even an Advanced Placement (AP) course was predominantly compliance driven, versus a broader and more enjoyable learning experience.

The teacher usually picks up the previous day's assignment that was homework, which was usually always two parts...two days' worth, each part being a review of 25 questions long and after each 25 questions, which means every other day we had 50 questions due, and so two days later after the review he would always have a test, but so he would pick up the review and then we would switch it around and then we would grade it, and then once when we got it back, he would then pass out the next one. And then it was, that's just what we did the whole year, until we began reviewing for the AP Exam at the very end of the year.

Elizabeth also described her passive compliance as a repetitive pattern when saying,

And so we would get notes. She'd put notes on the board and we'd write the notes down and then she would hand out our homework to us, and then we'd have a quiz or test on it the next day. And then it was just repeatedly the same thing.

Jason agreed concerning the repetitive nature of a passively compliant environment when commenting,

All we are doing is assignment after assignment. It's pretty repetitive to me and I feel that we can be more flexible in that class. We could do more in that class, but we just don't. We kind of sit down, do the assignment, and then that's pretty much it--sitting all.

Finally, Peter and Greg bantered back and forth about their passive experience in an AP course when sharing the following story: Peter said, “AP Gov, I understand the majority of the stuff we learn in Government, but we sit in the back, talk most of the time.” Greg continued, “And we both have a 101% in that class right now.” Peter concluded, “It’s one of the classes it is easy enough that you can get an A without actually really knowing anything.”

Such passivity is in contrast to the active engagement which is vital for student success across multiple learning ecologies (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). According to researchers, the active engagement of learners with their school education is necessary to acquire the knowledge and skills required for a successful transition into post-secondary learning programs or careers (Wang & Eccles, 2012). For learners to develop the necessary agency for continuous learning in career-related or higher education opportunities, sustaining student engagement over time is critical (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012).

Disinterested. The secondary school research participants also revealed disinterest as a primary factor in compliance based engagement. As learners are required to take many mandated curriculum area classes, all of the research participants explained they were profoundly disinterested in at least a few of their subject-specific classroom experiences due to the class not being one of their favorite subjects or by the teacher’s approach in applying the curriculum to the class. In speaking about one of his required upper-end AP classes, Greg shared the following:

Like it’s not my favorite subject, but I go into the class, listen to the teacher, listen to what they have to say, do the work, get it done, and then it’s over with. And then I feel like once I get it done, I don’t have to worry about it anymore, it’s out, it’s gone, like it’s not there anymore to do, it’s done, it’s over and not an issue, and I can talk with my friends and move on to other things from other classes that haven’t been done yet, whatever the case may be.

When asking the follow-up question, “What word or words would you use to describe how you feel during a class situation like that?” Greg responded, “Just going through the motions, not necessarily learning would be a pretty good descriptor of what I’m feeling at those times.”

A similar response came from Peter when asked to describe his perceptions of a required subject area class which is not a primary personal interest: “It’s just like a normal class, I’m compliant in it. Trying my hardest to get a good grade. I’ll just do the homework, but I’m not really asking any other questions, try to learn anymore that I need to.” Jan comparably shared, “It’s like we get what we need to get done to do well on the class.” Also, Mary expressed compliance engagement taking the form of disinterest through a sense of uselessness with her learning when stating,

It’s just whether or not I find the material that is being taught as useful or interesting, cause if it’s not, I may have like ‘this may not be interesting, but what am I gonna use this for?’ I might check out as soon as the first problem comes up on the board.

Peter summarized subject area disinterest as, “...classes which don’t reach out to me;” while Elizabeth, commenting on the requirement to take a foreign language for college entrance, “I just didn’t have an interest in learning the language;” whereas Ben reasoned disinterest occurs, “Because a lot of the classes, you’re learning stuff, but it’s not really going to influence your future or be useful in your future.”

When asked to describe a compliant experience of engagement and how that feels as a learner, Jason spoke about the dangers of turning an area of interest into disinterest for engagement when stating the following:

I didn’t like that classroom all year long. Science is one of my favorite areas of school, but in that classroom, as I said before in previous interviews, that one I didn’t feel too engaged in. In that classroom, it was kind of notes, computer, book. That one there wasn’t all too many instances where we would show a special way of our learning. Like we would have different projects here and there, like the cell project and stuff. But it was very rare that we would do those kinds of projects. It was a daily basis, go in,

get on your computer, look at Canvas, do your work. It feels like notes, notes, notes, quiz, test. That's what it feels like.

Jason's perception revealed disinterest may take the form of only teacher prescribed ways of approaching the curriculum, rather than learners having personalized options for exploring and demonstrating learning.

Alice also detailed the process and impact of the disinterest engagement state of experience when sharing about her Math class. While giving the grand tour of her school schedule and after explaining what she did in her Math class, Alice answered with the following when asked, "What was that like for you?"

A little bit disinteresting. It's just boring like I didn't have any interest in what we were learning. I think if we, I don't know, maybe if there was videos online that we could watch or something that. I think that would be a little bit better. I know there is Khan Academy and stuff and we didn't really ever use the Chromebooks other than IXL. So I think if we had an option to watch those if we were struggling, then I think that would be a good idea but other than that, it would be just like lesson, then homework. That was the same thing every day. I think some people are just doing it just because they have to get a good grade in there, not really because they are interested or they want to know about it. They probably are still learning and they have the information in their head, but it's probably not as well intact as other information from other classes.

Alice's explanation sheds further light on the possibility of the retention of learning not happening due to a disinterest of learners in the delivery model of the required curriculum.

When asking Greg how he made sense of his learning after recounting a mini-tour of his daily class schedule, he also perceived the likelihood of a loss of learning as the focus appeared to be on grades and credits, and not necessarily on interest or inquiry-based learning. For example, in Greg's Physics class he noted:

We'll be half doing this and half listening, while still getting this done [worksheet]. Probably we are not retaining what we should from it, but doing the work just so it gets done and still listening to him and having half of a grasp of what he is talking about. So that is what I would say is compliant and going through the motions and getting stuff done because the teacher told you to and because it's worth points, not because you really want to learn it.

While elaborating on possible causes for his disinterest in some of the required subject area classes when compared to earlier educational experiences at the elementary level, Peter reflected that time for developing positive relationships with the teacher was a likely factor.

Teachers seem to reach out more to the students [at the elementary level], and the students having that single teacher are able to have a better connection with them as compared to high school, us having them for a shorter period of time with the teacher, because we don't have them for near as much and it is almost as if the teacher doesn't reach out to the students near as much to have a better relationship with them.

Peter concluded that the stronger the relationship is with his teachers, the more engaged he is with the learning in those classes.

I don't know exactly how to say it, just that you concentrate more on that class and not really, just more it being so much of a blow-off class. You will be more at the edge of your seat listening the whole time, if I have a teacher that probably really reached out to me in a class that I really don't like, I end up getting closer to that connect and flow stage.

Research participants stressed the importance of teacher relationships as a crucial factor for generating interest engagement at the classroom level. Elizabeth explained her perception of how some secondary school learners go unnoticed by teachers because those learners are reserved or quiet. Elizabeth shared,

They show favoritism, I know they'll probably deny it, but I think that some teachers have like favorite kids and so it makes them not focus on the kids who don't talk much or who are struggling at home. I just think that they don't really -- like they notice them, but they don't really like maybe reach out to them.

John also emphasized great importance on teachers taking the initiative to establish rapport with individual learners to ensure students take an interest in a particular class. John constructively related,

How much you enjoy that class and then how much you enjoy the teacher is based on your relationship with the teacher. If you enjoy or want to learn this topic then the class goes by faster because you're sitting on the edge of your seat trying to take in as much information as possible...If you have a teacher in there that you really enjoy, who shows an interest in you, it makes you pay attention to the class more.

Furthermore, Greg emphasized how vital it was for teachers to initiate relationships with student learners for interest engagement at the classroom level to occur. “If I don’t have a great relationship with that teacher, even though it might not be a bad relationship...I will be more complacent, more compliant, and more willing to go through the motions in that class.”

In trying to make sense of how his engagement in learning from elementary through junior high and up to his current high school years has grown or diminished, John reflected on the significance of interest for engagement.

I think it just shrinks a little bit every year, just the way how I kind of look at it. Some years it sometimes stays the same, but I mean, I guess it just depends on who you have in your classes or what teacher you're gonna have or what classes you can take, because that's the biggest part about how interested and engaged you want to be.

Boredom. Another sub-theme of compliance engagement is boredom within the daily classroom experience. Research participants described boredom as “draining, dead brain learning, time goes so slow, waiting, getting the work done, and I’m just there.” Student learners at the secondary level described they were often longing for more excitement and energy in the classroom, however too often experienced feelings of indifference, tediousness, and detachment. Erin captured this sense of listlessness when describing her English class, “You walk in there and it's just all dead and you don't do anything. Some days you just sit down and that's all you do is work. It just gets tiring after a while.”

Relating how she felt during her compliant classroom experiences, Carol stated, “I do feel really bored a lot. Sometimes, I kind of catch myself not listening if they’re telling us something, and I'm, ‘Oh, I wasn't listening, this is an important thing.’ I sometimes just feel bored or uninterested.” Cindy expressed similar feelings in an Honors Science class when saying, “Yeah, in the beginning, sometimes we would pay attention, but at some point I usually just zoned out, like glaze over and I'm just sitting there, because it’s my last class and my eight

hours are almost up.” Jason could justify why he felt teachers provided such repetitive and lethargic classroom experiences by stating he understood it was just the prescribed curriculum.

Regardless, Jason demonstrated his inner struggle to empathize with teachers as they reverted to such English and math curriculum-based compliance classroom experiences when saying,

All we are doing is assignment after assignment. It's pretty repetitive to me and I feel we can be more flexible in that class. We could do more in that class (English), but we just don't. We kind of sit down, do the assignment and then that's pretty much it, sitting all the time. Math class, I enjoy math a lot so it wasn't that bad of an experience, but the experience was kind of mundane, boringish, because you were just kind of sitting at your desk and work and work and work and that's pretty much it. Occasionally, you could talk to friends and stuff, but she would crack down on it, saying, 'Come back to work.'

Jan constructed similar meaning when contrasting her active relationships with others and the ability to contribute to her learning during her A+ tutoring class with her social studies and English classes.

I'd probably say like Government and English are kind of like compliant, we don't really... Sometimes I'm focused, sometimes I'm not but I can get away with not focusing so that's, why, I don't engage myself if I don't have to because I don't enjoy those subjects as much. But I feel like most of the time, I feel like I get more out of like A-plusing, by helping younger girls and not just sitting in a classroom.

Jan provided an example from her social studies class about how the prescribed and set curriculum drove learners towards a dull daily classroom experience, even though exciting and relevant learning opportunities existed with current events occurring in the national conversation.

We had an election and we didn't change the curriculum or anything. It's like, 'Yeah, this happens, you know there was a debate, that was cool.' But, instead it was really boring. It's like, okay, there's something with our nation happening, it's exciting, and we're not talking about it, like rarely, and so there wasn't really a purpose. It's the way it's taught, it's not interesting. That's boring.

Elizabeth portrayed boredom in her math classroom as a daily repetitiveness and race to rush through the curriculum, which resulted in a lack of opportunity to inquire with her teacher or classmates what her learning meant.

We would get notes. She'd put notes on the board and we'd write the notes down and then she would hand out our homework to us, and then we'd have a quiz or test on it the next day. And then it was just repeatedly the same thing. And it was all too fast. That's why it was hard because we didn't really get taught. There's just notes over it. We didn't have time to talk with her and weren't allowed to talk with our friends, so we all texted each other at night, but still couldn't get it.

When asked how she felt going through that classroom experience, Elizabeth answered, "Very frustrated. That was my worst class. And it's just frustrating because it's the same thing. I didn't feel like I was getting taught anything in that class."

Mary denoted how she did not look forward to going to her history or math classes, because there was so little social interaction between student learners, the teacher, and each other. Instead, her teachers directed the courses according to the daily set curriculum, allowing little to no time for learners' inquiries or shared thinking. Mary related the following experiences from her history and math classes,

There's not a lot of interaction [in history]...he sits in the back and he has a little pointer and we get a sheet...so you follow along and you take your own notes in bullet points. Algebra...is basically the same thing. There was notes and then, there was notes every day and then we get a worksheet. So there's not really anything drastic change, yeah. It's just notes and then worksheet or if it's like a review, we work on the review all day and then the next day we take the test. And then we do notes, worksheet, worksheet, worksheet and then test. The only teacher interaction there is from like presenting the notes, blah, blah, blah. 'Okay here's your worksheet,' she sits down and everybody just sits there and writes, does their worksheets. They're my two least favorite classes of the day and the fact they're next to each other, it's definitely hard to like.

When I asked Mary how she felt during such classroom experiences of compliance, Mary responded,

Tired, looking at the clock a lot because I'm like trying to speed things up. Not all the time confused, but just kind of like either I totally get it and I'm just like, 'Oh, I'm just going to have to keep hearing this over and over again,' or I'm not really too sure what's exactly happening but it's not too intense for me to worry about, so I just kind of waited it out I suppose.

In closing, Mary shared she would take as long as she needed to walk with her friends to get to her math class.

When asking the research participants to explain what they thought accounted for such boredom levels of compliance engagement in their secondary school experience in comparison to their elementary years, learners shared enlightening insights. Jan said, “In elementary it was like fun, you know doing things like with our classes and we were so excited to go to school. But now they're kind of taking the fun out of school, and just make you sit there.” Greg elaborated on Jan’s comment by stating, “I think because the stakes are raised a little bit I guess, that sounds like really serious, but that's so much where I think that, everything you do matters a little bit more.” Marcia then responded to Greg,

I think, [long pause], a lot of students need a why though? That’s what’s helped me, is because I know why I am doing something. I know why I’m taking this...class, and how it’s going to help me with my future. But a lot of people don’t know why? You know like, they don’t know what their wanting to do when they grow up and they don’t what they like to do and what they enjoy doing, and so their Algebra or English class is just a class, that’s a credit. And so when people understand who they are and they’re learning methods and what they love and what they want to do, then it gives them a purpose for doing it.

It was fascinating to watch the interaction between student learners as they sought to make sense of their experiences. John illustrated the propensity for boredom at the secondary level with the mental model of getting your driver’s license and first car for the opportunity to drive yourself for the first time.

You're like, 'Oh man this is great, I've never been used to this before...It's like that, where seventh grade you come in, 'Oh man I've never been used to this before, this is so great,' and then seventh grade comes on, then eighth grade you're like, 'this is still pretty good,' and then you go on to high school and you're thinking, 'man I've been doing this for three years now and then four and then five and then you go through high school and it's the same thing since seventh grade. Every year that you keep completing of high school you look back and normally you'll say, 'I've been doing this since seventh grade and man I've been here for a long time it feels like,' because you don't have that excitement because

you're not really looking forward to something different for the next year, you're just eight classes or seven classes a day.

In conclusion, behavioral engagement may not be enough for students to succeed in college and careers where higher order thinking is required, motivation must manifest itself in the potential for self-guided action, and students must be both emotionally and cognitively engaged to succeed (Conley, 2007, 2010). Indeed, intrinsic academic motivation, or “self-motivation for and enjoyment of academic learning and tasks,” is more strongly correlated with college GPA than academic extrinsic motivation, or “learning and involvement in academic tasks for instrumental reasons” (French, 2014; Richardson et al., 2012)

Controlled. The final sub-category of compliance engagement which research participants stated as a perceived state of experience at the classroom level was a sense of being controlled. Student learners used words and phrases such as “chained, restricted, tells us what to do, directions, no talking, no asking questions, judged, do the work, assignments, and time goes so slow,” as descriptors for being controlled and how they felt during such experiences at the classroom or school level. While learners expressed a strong desire for guidance and support from teachers and other adults at school (a forthcoming sub-category in itself), they were equally desirous for more freedom and control with their own learning experiences in school.

Research participants expressed one of the most normal and fundamental ways this controlled state of experience occurred was a daily routine of sitting quietly with expectant passive submission to adults’ directions and plans. Jason described his essence of being controlled when sharing the following:

When you are sitting down and you don't have much of a choice, you do an assignment, that's what all you have to do and you don't feel engaged in that classroom, you just kind of, ‘Oh I have to do this to pass the class and get out of the classroom once I'm done.’

Alice articulated similar compliance as the daily norms in many of her classes by listing a litany of teacher-directed actions and subsequent expectations upon the class, followed by the resulting impact of how this felt as a learner.

She would write what we we're doing that day, so we would write that in our planners and then *she* would talk briefly about it and then *she* would get on to the lesson plan...*She* would give us homework about it and then we have to do it and that's just kind of it the whole day.

He will take about five minutes to talk about like the daily agenda or if there is a project during the week. *He* will talk about certain goals that *he* wants us to reach during the week and stuff. *He* would take like 10, 15 minutes talking about the week and what we were going to do that day and *we* would just get on straight to the notes. So like every week, Monday through Thursday, it would be just strictly notes and then on Friday, it would be a quiz and then the next week, it would be exactly the same.

I need to get this done so I can get a five out of five for the week and that would just kind of be it. I think that was kind of everyone's goal in the class. I didn't feel encouraged to do my work. I just did it because *I had to* or I didn't necessarily like it, but I just had to do it because *they* gave it to me and it was an assignment.

Erin conveyed similar feelings of controlled compliance when sharing, "Sometimes it feels like its compliant, because they just give us certain topics and then tell us, this is to be worked on. We don't get choices, but most of the times just have to complete the work."

Ben also shared about his experiences of controlled compliance when stating, "A lot of the time though we were just sort of sat down and then told what we had to do for that day and then, we will just do nothing much, just work on that." When asked how he felt during such "sat down" experiences, Ben answered,

I felt very constrained, cause very rarely other than like the quick writes, did we get to do creative writing, which I really enjoy to do but a lot of the times, it was sort of just you have to do this and you have to follow this. I'm very like restrained in what I can do such as, I have to sit down and then follow the guidelines exactly.

Reflecting on how much more she understood engagement after serving as a participant in this study, Elizabeth provided the following description of controlled compliance engagement from one of her classes and her subsequent feelings of hopelessness.

I think before this, I didn't really realize how not engaged I was a lot of the time. I think we just accept it, because we can't really do anything about it. I think this has made me more aware of how not engaged I am a lot of the time.

Carol reported similar experiences of teachers providing curriculum-centered approaches to the classroom. "It's another one of those classes where you just sort of like, you're sat down, you're taught, and then, you would just get problem, after problem, after problem, for like the homework and stuff to do."

Peter echoed a similar mantra when articulating his answer to how he would prefer to learn new information and skills instead of expected controlled compliance to pre-arranged curriculum.

We never really learned how to apply Mathematics to real life situations other than word problems...But we would very rarely work on word problems. Instead of asking questions and understanding how math applies to life, careers, or just everyday problem-solving, we would just do the formulas and then, the equations but we just do those like over and over. We never figured out really how to apply those to real life scenarios.

While Carol expressed some satisfaction with teachers providing limited choice or options with assignments, in the end, it still felt like a controlled state of compliance engagement.

You didn't really get to choose, he just kind of told you what to do and even though there's still a project you've got to work on, and told to make it your own, it still feels like he was just telling us kind of what to do. They gave us some freedom, but they really didn't let you choose. It would have been awesome if we could have chosen what argument or topic we wanted to work with.

Peter expressed similar frustration when explaining how teachers initially sought out student learner interest at the beginning of the school year for taking greater ownership of their learning, but how teachers lacked follow-through with real student buy-in.

When you go through syllabuses, I mean, I don't know. They [teachers] ask you how do you learn, what interests you have, what do you want to learn this year. And we all fill that out and we give it to them. But I feel like, they don't really count; it doesn't seem to make a difference. I give it to them like, 'I don't really think, you guys-- like teaching plan is really going to change, you're just going to go about it. You're just going to kinda of make us, yeah, just like make us feel like we're being heard.' But I don't think their actual course is going to actually change around how my opinion is...I don't think they really take that into account that much.

One resulting consequence of a lock-step, command and control teacher and curriculum centered approach to learning appeared to be a lack of comprehension of subject matter or skill level on the part of the secondary student learners. Research participants expressed considerable frustration and bewilderment concerning teachers' taking for granted student learners understood the learning process or content at hand. The following focus group conversation revealed this perceived controlled state of compliance engagement with its impending results of frustration for the student learners. Peter began this conversation when relating his perceived reality of teacher expectations for students to naturally understand the curriculum as presented in the classroom.

Peter: I'm normally too scared to ask them [teachers] for help. Almost if I'm, unless I really, really need it, but rarely I'll ask them for help.

Researcher: Does anyone else ever feel like that?

Marcia: I can relate!

Jan: Oh yeah.

Researcher: You're afraid to ask the teachers for help?

Olivia: 100%.

Jan: Teachers teach what you're doing, but they don't teach in a way that you understand. And so then you feel like you're basically stupid if you go and ask them because they'll be like, 'Really? We already went over this.' And it's like, Okay, I know you've already taught me this and I should know it, but I'm embarrassed to say that I don't know.

Marcia: Yeah, there are so many different ways to learn something, but our teachers only know one way, at the most two ways.

Researcher: So how do you feel when you're in that experience?

Marcia: Dumb.

Olivia: Dumb. Kind of like you're up against a wall like you just—you just, you can't—whenever... like I've had experiences with teachers, like I'll miss a day of school or whatever and I'll get kind of behind so I'll try to go in and get tutoring for it, but then the teacher, obviously is sometimes like, not always, but sometimes they're just obviously not interested in teaching, like teaching you at that point. They're like, if you miss class for a school function or something and you miss it and you come back, they're like, 'You should've been here.' And like I don't know. It makes you just feel dumb because you're trying to learn, but then they're not wanting to really do it. I don't know how to explain that.

Jan: It's like, if it's not like a time that you're supposed to be in class for you're learning, it's like not their problem anymore.

Olivia: Yeah!

Jan: I feel like, they're kind of like, 'Okay. I taught what you're supposed to know but you weren't here, so that's your fault.'

Jan contrasted her feelings from the controlled compliance state of engagement with current connection states of engagement when expressing the following:

Most of the time when I'm in classes I don't want to be in I'm going, 'Okay this is kind of pointless, there's no point of me being here, because I'm not getting anything out of it, I'd rather be on the soccer field and practicing and getting better at things that actually matter to me than things that are okay, like I have to take that class because I have to get the credit but it's not like, there's not a purpose for it in my mind.

Jan continued her contrast when sharing a future connection state of engagement experience of a Medical Explorers class scheduled for next school year on-site at a local hospital:

I'm super excited for [Medical Explorers] next year because I'll be able to actually see a purpose for what I'm doing and not just have to sit in a classroom, because I can't sit still and just not do anything, it's just not my personality and so having like those teachers that are going to give us hands-on experiences and they're going to, really tell us, 'Okay this is going to help you in the future. This is how you can apply this to life.' I know that helps me a lot more than just being like, 'Okay, learn this, we'll have a test', okay that's completely short-term memory I'm not going to remember that next week.

Jason summarized the research participants' perceived experience in a controlled compliance state of engagement when remarking,

You don't want to be sat down then chained to a curriculum, 'Do this and this and this,' and then go on your merry way. No. You want to engage in what you want to do. You want to, you know paint something that you want to paint or you want to make a project that you want to do. It is how you want to learn instead of how the system wants you to learn. Why should the system default to what they want, why restrict me?

Summary of Theme One. Through this dissertation in practice study research participants became familiar with the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C). At the conclusion of their focus group, individual interview, and writing prompt opportunities, learners were asked to provide a percentage for each level of the continuum they had experienced as a secondary student learner. Although the student learner respondents' perceived compliance was the highest percentage of their engagement continuum experiences at the secondary level, two thought-provoking summaries were made by Greg and Cindy during their final individual interviews.

While Greg responded his continuum experiences were 50% compliant, 15% commit, and 20% connect, he abruptly paused while thinking about his final category response [flow], and provided this perception of his experiences as a secondary school learner.

I think, I don't know but I feel like there is more flow in my school day then connect, cause I feel like, I don't think there's ever really, for me anyway, there's never really a happy medium. Oh that sounds interesting, but I may not engage, I think it's more, 'I don't care,' or 'I'm really interested and I want to know more and I'm asking, and I'm talking with the teacher, pursuing that.' So I feel like the middle two maybe don't apply as much, but I would still say the majority is probably compliant.

Cindy responded similarly with her final assessment of her experiences on the continuum of engagement.

I feel like it's either like one extreme or the other...you're either sitting in a chair and you're not allowed to talk and you're not allowed to express your thoughts or you've given like a project and you can do whatever you want with whatever you want.

The preponderance of perceptual data from the secondary school research participants revealed a teaching and curriculum-centered learning environment, focused on passive and controlled compliance, where the learner is expected to only wait to be told what to do and then follow directions. At this lowest rung of the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C), research participants reported everyday experiences of passivity, disinterest, boredom, and control.

However, significant portions of perceptual data shared by research participants also revealed the malleable nature of student engagement. When the teachers, coaches, or other adults in school provided learning environments characterized by opportunities for student learners to share their voices; to have freedom and responsibility for selecting learning interests, setting learning goals, and choosing how they wanted to demonstrate their learning; to maintain connections with caring adults for guidance and support throughout their multiple socio-ecological learning communities; to secure interpersonal learning relationships with peers and adults alike; and to comprehend a clear purpose and relevance for the learning experiences at hand, then connection states of engagement were realized. We now turn our attention to this second revealed theme, the connection state of engagement.

Theme Two: The Rung of Connection as Engagement

The second predominant theme that emerged in this dissertation in practice study was connection as engagement across school, home, and community environments. Research participants portrayed connection states of experience as learners possessing significant relationships with caring adults and friends as well as environments characterized by freedom, trust, responsibility, guidance, purpose, and opportunities for involvement across multiple areas of interest. When research participants perceived their needs as learners took on equal or greater importance as the needs of the adults in charge, the curriculum, or the procedures and rules of the

setting, the learners expressed attainment to higher levels on the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C).

Also, student learners' responses throughout the study affirmed the multi-dimensional and socio-ecological nature of engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Research participants shared a common perception of the importance of the environment for engagement in learning and a dislike for environments where student learners were expected to be on auto-pilot. Student learners expressed strong agreement that teachers and other adults in charge of classroom and school level activities are responsible for creating learner-centered environments which focus on meeting the affective, cognitive, and relational needs of learners in the classroom and at school.

For example, Peter, Jan, and Olivia shared their lived experience of a connected state of engagement when describing the influence of a teacher they held in common who provided such a learner-centered environment. Peter began by relating how this particular teacher was available, amicable, and approachable within the classroom while still holding student learners accountable for their learning. Peter said,

I can go up to Mr. Sims, ask him help for anything, with his class or if I needed help for any other class, being the head of the academic team, he's smart in like all the areas, so he could help me with just about anything. He will give us some worksheet or assignment and he doesn't care if we put it straight in our bag as long as we have it done by the next day. I like having that relationship with my teacher knowing that he's--he wants me to be successful in all my classes, especially his class, but he'll just help me out with anything. Jan continued, "He really cares about what you're learning and what you're doing. It's not like, he doesn't blow any issue off. He's always like, 'Okay. How can I help you? How can I help you become successful?'"

Finally, Olivia concluded, "Mr. Sims the real MVP. I've never had him as a teacher, but he's my Stu-Co rep and he's so like, he'll help me with just anything. With problems with my personal life or school. He's awesome."

Research participants perceived across multiple socio-ecological environments that when their relational interactions with adults exhibited sincere care and a clear sense of belonging; when opportunities existed for guidance, support, and feedback with learning concepts; when they possessed realistic possibilities to express their voice and thoughts among other freedom and responsibility experiences, including the choice to cooperate in meeting adult expectations; and finally, when their learning activities were purposeful and personally relevant, they experienced a connection level of engagement within the learning community.

To obtain a rich data set, I used the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C) and the follow-up inquiry of, “Looking at the four various states of experience on the graphic representation of engagement, describe a class or classes which represent one or more of the states of engagement.” I then asked student learners the following exploratory probing prompts:

1. What are you doing when you are in the connection state of engagement in class?
2. What was that like for you?
3. Could you tell me a story or give an example of being in the connection state of engagement?

Accordingly, the ensuing four sub-themes emerged as descriptors of the connection level of engagement from the horizon lived experiences of student learners participating in this study. The order of the sub-themes presented isn't necessarily based on their level of importance, but instead upon their preponderance for how student learners conceptualized a connection state of engagement across secondary school, home, and community settings during this study. Lastly, the iterative process of data analysis signified an interrelatedness of the sub-themes, accounting for the strong conceptual connections and overlap between the emerging sub-themes.

The importance of the teacher. Research participants communicated the role of the teacher was of great importance in reaching a connection state of engagement. Student learners

repeatedly expressed appreciation for teachers who exhibited a passion for their role as an educator, for their particular subject area, or most significantly, for the student learners themselves. Also, secondary school learners admired teachers who provided freedom and responsibility opportunities to experience a variety of classroom experiences, in contrast to a monotonous and passive routine. As research participants took part in their individual and focus group sessions, reconstructing their daily experiences at school, home, and in the community through grand and mini-tour interviews, over 200 horizon experiences related to the impact of a teacher, coach, parent, mentor, or another adult, emerged during this study.

One of the key perceptions secondary school learners shared concerning reaching anything beyond a compliant level of engagement was possessing a connection with a teacher, coach, or another significant adult. Research participants stressed the importance of adults taking the initiative for such connection before student learners were likely to commit to active engagement in any classroom or school learning activities. For example, Elizabeth related how her English class felt like a connection state of engagement because of the teacher.

I enjoy English, but sometimes I don't like what we're doing. But, Mrs. Biggs makes it enjoyable in just like her attitude towards you. It's always upbeat and she's always smiling. And she'll do anything to make sure you pass her class and help you out.

Inspired by Elizabeth's comments, Mary recalled a similar state of connection engagement during her junior high experience. "That reminds me. I had a teacher for Pre-Algebra and Algebra in seventh and eighth grade -- I had the same teacher. And she was soooo into teaching. She loved math. And even though I struggled in that class..." At that point Cindy interrupted Mary and inquired, "Ms. Newton?" Mary responded, "Yeah!" Meanwhile, Elizabeth and John also piped up and responded enthusiastically about Ms. Newton's demeanor

and impact on them. Once everyone spoke their mind about Ms. Newton, Mary continued on with her connection engagement state of experience in Ms. Newton's class.

I struggled in that class. And there were times where I came home, like, crying, since I didn't get it. But she was someone who -- she pulled me out in the hallway and said, 'Okay, what's up?' She generally cared and just seemed to, like, know when people didn't get it. And she didn't embarrass you in any way. So even though I really don't like Math, and I don't entirely understand the whole process, I do think that class was like a commit or connect level, just because the teacher seemed to care a whole lot.

Cindy kept this focus group exchange going concerning reaching a connection state of engagement by stating,

I think it has a lot to do with the teacher. It doesn't matter if you're super passionate about something, if you're in a class where the teacher isn't passionate -- who doesn't, who isn't open to questions and interactions, you can't really do anything about it, to an extent, I think.

Elizabeth added, "When teachers show that they care, and just little things like that, I think it makes you want to learn more and reach your goals more." John summarized this portion of the research participants' focus group interview with the following perception of class enjoyment leading to a higher state of engagement.

I also noticed quite a bit that -- normally, when a few kids start to connect with the teacher, it usually, eventually leads to a whole class becoming pretty well having a pretty good relationship with the teacher. And then the whole class enjoys, finds that class enjoyable and you want to engage in learning with the teacher.

When I asked the research participants the follow-up question of what seemed to make the perceived difference in classroom environments where secondary students saw the learning activity moving away from just being work they were doing for the teachers to learning they were doing for themselves, the following responses ensued. Mary began by stating, "Definitely the teachers, how passionate the teacher is over the subject reflects onto the students and on how passionate they're going to be with something." John followed with his perception of the importance of having an actual relationship with the teacher.

Another thing that I'd like to add on that is, I was just thinking that when you do have relationships with a teacher, and you are in that flow stage, it not only makes the class easier, but when you do actually have tests or homework that you have to do outside of school or to study for, it makes you want to do it because, 'Hey, he knows me and I don't want to let him down, because I know him too.' Or, it would get me excited to come up with a really great idea for a project or something I would be proud to present in class. I would prefer a personal relationship with him, because they're like your parent at school, so you don't want to let him down. You'll do the extra stuff that'll help you and you'll try your hardest, which thinking about it, the classes that I struggled in are the classes that I wasn't in that close stage, or didn't have a relationship with the teacher. I didn't want to study for their test, I see why because I didn't really like that teacher.

Peter reported it was the friendliness of teachers accounting for his increased desire to learn and drive his learning, both characteristics of the higher levels on the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C). Peter shared,

It's kind of weird, but the less I feel like they [adults at school] are a teacher or coach, the more that they seem like just like a friend of yours, or something like that, the more comfortable I am with them I guess. The more comfortable I am with them, the more I feel that I am going to learn...It helps me push towards flow.

Jan emphasized equally the significance of the teacher reaching out to establish rapport and a safe, inviting environment for classroom participation. Jan made sense of her confidence in participating in learning activities based on the perception she was personally important to the teacher or adult in charge.

Yeah, you have to feel like you are important to who you are trying to please or learn from. But it is also for me a confidence level. If I don't feel confident in that class, or confident in what I am going to say then I am just not going to say anything, but just be more compliant. But if my teachers really focus on the student and figuring out what makes them feel comfortable in the classroom, build that confidence level, it is going to help everyone.

During another focus group interview exchange, Olivia similarly noted the presence of excellent relational connections with her activity sponsors accounting for her higher states of engagement with learning.

Honestly, I think the reason I have such a great time with Band and Student Council is because I have such a good relationship with both Rip and Howe and then also, like with Missy and Mr. Sims. I think honestly the biggest part of getting to the flow section is the students having a great relationship with the teacher. Because I always love the classes and learn new things, even if I don't like the subject, if I love the teacher.

Jan continued this focus group exchange by recognizing the link between positive relationships with a teacher or coach and higher states of connection engagement.

I know I get more excited after school when I get to go to practice and games, because I've known all three of my coaches for a few years at school. I have a really good connection with them and I would consider Coach Davis as my second dad, since I A plus him [serves as his student assistant for one section a day in helping lead an elementary PE class], I'm over there all the time. Like he helped me make my college decision and has helped me like with so much more than just school.

Elizabeth agreed, stating,

Soccer is definitely a flow experience because of Coach Davis. He's really good with words. He believes in you no matter what. And he's always encouraging you and pushing you to not only be a better athlete, but a better person. And so that's what I like. This is my first year playing soccer and I had no idea what I was doing, but he always made me feel like I can play no matter what.

Another focus group also perceived the importance of active relational care and a sincere sense of belonging created by the teacher for establishing connection states of engagement in the classroom. Junior high level research participants expressed high regard for a teacher's capacity to communicate how much they valued both the student learner as well as their learning. For example, those research participants who had Ms. Stowe as a teacher perceived her classroom as warm and inviting and that she was personally concerned over the well-being of her student learners. In speaking about the impact of Ms. Stowe, Ben shared, "What I really liked about her class is she always had a connection with her students and so, you could really feel the energy in that room, which is really nice."

Another example was Ben and Carol admiring Ms. Einstein for taking time to engage learners in both academic and social-emotional learning. Ben and Carol perceived the regular

use of “Beginning Bits,” a beginning of class warm-up centered on an interesting quote, story of human resilience, or other inspirational thought, and subsequent time for reflective small group and whole group discussion, leading to greater states of connection engagement with the regular curriculum than if the class only focused on Science. Carol shared, “With Ms. Einstein, just her taking time to teach you the important character traits you will need for life was great,” as well as, “Ms. Einstein would often say, ‘This is important that you know it, okay? The grades don't matter, even though you may think they do, it's about the learning.’ She made you want to learn.”

Ben also perceived a significant life impact by Ms. Einstein due to her approach and the nature of her classroom environment when sharing the following sentiments.

She really opens up your mind, expands your way of thinking...She cares about your own learning and how you're becoming learner driven. She always had a connection with her students. I think one of the biggest things is the connection that the teacher has with the students or whether or not you can really see that the teacher cares about the students' learning.

Carol continued about Ms. Einstein establishing a safe and respectful environment during the Beginning Bits sessions when sharing:

You would think kids might be rude with their different opinions, but it's actually a respectful environment. Even if you didn't agree, something like, ‘Yeah, I don't want to make you feel bad, but I disagree with this for what it means, at least for now.’ It's really nice, because Ms. Einstein set it up that way and everyone followed what she expected, because she was that way herself.

Finally, Ben made sense of his entire experience with Ms. Einstein in her Science classroom through his closing reflection:

It's like one of her quotes she shared, ‘Everyone is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its entire life thinking it's stupid.’ You can tell how much Ms. Einstein cares about your own learning, because she gets really in depth with it and it's just-- it really opens up your mind, so like new ideas and stuff at the same time. Cause it makes you rethink life in very different ways, which I really like...I don't know,

I feel better in that class, 'cause I can tell that she cares about how much each one of us is learning and she cares about us.

In research participants' final individual interview sessions, I asked student learners the questions, "How many teachers know you well and how important is it to be known well by your teachers?" Student learners were eager to jump in and share about their closeness or lack thereof with various teachers they were required to interact with at school. Alice illustrated this eagerness with the ensuing response:

I would probably say two out of my seven teachers know me well...I think it's really important because it makes you feel better about the class or just makes you feel better about going to school, you can have the opportunity to talk to the teacher you know that they care for you...So I think it's really important for that personal connection between the teachers and students, because I think the students feel more welcome to a classroom like that.

Jan also demonstrated an enthusiasm to jump in and answer the twin questions by saying,

Going through my freshman year, even now I still go to Coach Ford's room and Ms. Dinah's room who were teachers I had in the 9th Grade Center, who I haven't had since then. And so just having like that connection with teachers makes you feel more comfortable, and makes you feel more confident in school, and even like with your peers, knowing that you have that like safe place in the school, you can go and just like, I have had a bad day, I just needed to relax, or I need someone to talk to, just having that adult that you can just be straight up with and tell them what is going on, it helps.

Likewise, Mary also acknowledged the importance of her freshmen year for being known well by a group of teachers, helping her transition into high school, and experiencing strong connections with her 9th Grade Center teacher team. Mary shared more specifically about her freshman Physical Science teacher, Mr. Bohr.

It's the fact that since he was so loose and excited about Science. He would tease everyone that he was slow about getting to know the type of people he was teaching when in fact he spent a lot of time getting to know us. He would often walk around, and there was one point when I had Math the next hour, and I would need to get it done. He was like 'Oh, didn't get that Math done, did you?' and of course instead of attacking me for not doing his work, he was like 'Oh, do you need help on that or anything like that? But you still need to get this done.' And understanding that we all have different classes and different lives than we do to the person next to us. He kind of understood

and he engaged in things that are outside of his class, like my running.

Cindy also remembered the positive connection with Mr. Bohr from her freshman year, relating the following connection state of engagement experience.

If we had a dance competition that weekend, I don't know how he'd find out about these things, but he'd be like 'So, how was dance?' He just asks you questions, or he'd come over -- I sat by Margaret Grant all year, and sometimes we'd get our worksheets done early and we'd talk about our stuff, and he would just come and stand behind you and listen to your conversation and talk about -- he would somehow direct it to something else, but he would always talk to you about things besides his class and besides school. I think he was genuinely interested in your interests, your hopes, and your dreams besides his Science class. I think he made a point to trying to get to know the students.

Greg aptly concluded the conversation on the importance and impact of having a solid connection with teachers by stating, "Teacher connection is paramount. The biggest thing for me personally is probably a good relationship with the teacher. I think having a good solid relationship with them, where you are comfortable with each other, helps you engage a lot."

Freedom and responsibility opportunities. Another prominent perception of research participants which enabled them to reach connection levels of engagement across their multiple socio-ecological environments was possessing freedom and responsibility for their learning. Over 175 horizon experiences related to the importance of freedom and responsibility states of experience emerged during this research study. According to the research participants, one of the ways adults provided freedom and responsibility opportunities within a particular learning environment was teachers tapping into the motivation of learners by granting students a voice during their learning experiences. When asked to reflect on the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C) and what helped secondary learners move up the spectrum of engagement to the point of buying in or putting all their chips on the table, research participants answered passionately about teachers or coaches who allowed them to have a voice in the learning process.

For instance, Marcia shared, “If I don’t feel like my opinion or the things I have to say, if I feel like they don't matter then I am not going to commit myself.” Marcia went on to share emphatically about her perception of the importance of the affective and cognitive needs of student learners being acknowledged by adults to reach connection levels of engagement.

I feel comfortable and valued when I feel my opinion is taken seriously. When I'm in the drama room, I feel, not that I'm equal [in position or authority] to Miss Rollins, but that she actually pays attention to what I have to say. You know, like I help make the sets and I help decide the shows...It was really nice to know that I am needed and that I am taken seriously in an environment that I love.

Marcia went on to highlight her perception of how a significant environmental change occurred within the Drama department between her freshman and junior years. Marcia ascribed responsibility for the change to the new teacher in charge of the Drama department as the reason for her and other student learners’ voices beginning to matter.

In my freshman year, I had Mrs. Coleman and you know, I’ve been doing theater for years and I thought I knew what I could do, that my opinion was wanted, but it wasn't and it was hard to go to that class. And so now, knowing that I'm seen as someone important and that my education in that field is taken seriously and that if we want to learn something about show production, it's like, ‘Do it. You want to learn how to work the light board, go and I'll help you if you need it.’ And so that environment is so nice to be in. And that's part of why it's my favorite class is my voice is always heard. And whether it's taken seriously or like if they say, ‘We are actually not going to learn about Greek theater because of this reason.’ I go, ‘Okay. Then we won't.’ And I'll learn it on my own time. And I get reasons why we don't do things. And my voice, like I feel like people actually care about what I have to say, which is really nice.

Peter also spoke strong words about the importance of the teacher or adult in charge of the learning environment to trust and treat student learners as young adults who are welcomed and included as valuable members of the learning experience.

I believe there should be equal levels of respect between me and the teachers, and with the other students. When I know that is the case, because I'm actually free to talk, to share my thinking and hear others thinking, it really helps me feel like I can open up, and actually talk, and learn, and soak up what I am hearing instead of, ‘Don't talk, shut up, I am teaching right now.’ Then I don't want to engage, I am not going to talk. I am not going to listen to you. And so respect is a big thing.

Jan echoed the perception of the freedom to be heard, being treated as a young adult and taken seriously, and the resulting impact for connection states of engagement when speaking about her Science teacher.

He doesn't talk down to you. He actually treats you like, ok... You never feel like he's superior to you. He actually wants to know your ideas for learning and how you like to learn, not just his way. You feel like you're just like another friend or something.

Cindy also exemplified this perceived link between teachers who gave voice to their students while also expecting responsible learner contributions in class and research participants reaching connection states of engagement and subsequent in-depth learning experiences when sharing about her Honors Biology class.

Mr. Daniels would be talking about something and he'd be like, 'Well, Cindy, what do you think about it?' and you would just talk about how you see what you're talking about and he'll talk to you and the class more about it and then ask other people about it like, 'Do you think the same as Cindy? What do you think about it?' He just makes sure that you feel like you're engaged, yeah. He wants to know how you feel about things and how you see it and how you're learning from it. It's not just taught one way and he's so open to discussion. You always feel like you're a person in that class and he cares about you and what you think. You want to learn and talk to him about it. And you knew to be ready, because you never knew who he was going to involve next.

Mary agreed with Cindy about the opportunities for autonomous learning in Mr. Daniels class and how those personalized preferences led to connection states of engagement. Mary said, "He allows you a lot of different ways to show your learning." Olivia shared similar words about her Government teacher when stating, "Mr. Brenner is an amazing teacher... we have classroom arguments and he has a really open classroom concept so we can talk about anything we want and ask questions about random stuff and he will answer it."

Additionally, research participants went into great detail of how their various school activities and relationships with coaches or sponsors afforded them freedom and responsibility

states of experience as a member of a team, club, or organization. Jan illustrated her perception of this connection state of engagement when enthusiastically sharing the following.

Coach Davis almost every day talked to me about what we should be doing differently and what I can do, like coming up with a plan, helping the girls where they buy in with what we're trying to achieve. And I know, like I mean, I A plus him this year, so I'm with him every single day and now I'm with him every single day after practice. And so he's been a super like encouraging person to want to know my thoughts as a team captain on how the team should work.

Similarly, Greg added how his position coach in football related with him through the process of becoming the high school starting quarterback.

By the winter of my sophomore year, after football, so between the football and baseball seasons of my sophomore year, I was going over to the junior high every day and we were lifting and throwing. And during that winter he was-- like we would talk about the upcoming season, what that was going to look like. And one of the things that he kept telling me was, because at that point, I was trying to win the starting quarterback job. He told me that the job was mine to win or mine to lose. It's going to be up to me whether I get it or not. And so that really stuck in my mind, that it was my responsibility to show the coaches they needed me to take the starting job.

Upon hearing Greg's response, I asked him, "How did that feel when your coach said that?"

Greg answered,

It felt like a lot of pressure, but I felt it was like good pressure and I was ready for it. So that kind of made me work a little harder. And then, I think when I really won the job was at the Parkview 7 on 7 tournament last summer. I did the first drive and we scored a touchdown. I went like four for four and we scored a touchdown and went on to take fourth place. And then I just stayed in for the rest of the tournament. I ended up having a pretty good tournament. And then, from that point on, when I would go and hang out with Coach Humm, to throw and watch film or whatever, he would say, 'Alright now, now you're the guy who did it. You won the job. Now you're the guy. Now you've got to go out and actually do it this fall. So that was kind of what that felt like for me.

During his focus group's second interview, Greg continued to talk about his athletics opportunities for freedom and responsibility by talking about the impact of his coaches believing in him and developing him to help run the offense during actual games.

I think it probably plays into, I mean, I think you guys can probably attest to this. I think I'm a pretty confident person. And I think that probably plays a role in their

confidence in me, that I know I can make the right calls, but I will only get better if they trust me to make the right calls and learn from when I make the wrong calls, still trusting me by not giving me less responsibility, but just to learn from it. But I know I have to put in the time, my work needs to be put in to be good at what I'm doing and I think having that coach or that mentor to also have confidence in you, I think helps boost your confidence. And really that's one of the biggest things in playing quarterback is being confident in yourself.

Jan and Greg's comments sparked even more conversation about the seemingly inherent opportunities for freedom and responsibility through participation in school activities. Marcia eagerly jumped in to share more about her experiences in the Drama department.

Being Drama club president, its student chosen, slash Rollins chosen, so like both. But she pulled me aside and she's like, 'You need to know everything, everything about this theater. You need to know how the tools work. What all the words are called, where all the paints are, where all the props are, where all the costumes are. You need to know how to work the sound board and the light board. And you need to know-- you need to sweep the stage with me. And know how to teach these kids these different games, so they get involved, because it's your job to get people to want to audition for our shows. Otherwise, we don't have shows.' And so she, during our classes she'll say stuff like, 'Hey, auditions are next week,' but then pull me aside and say, 'It's your job to make sure that this drama department continues growing, Marcia. This year we got to write plays or I mean parts of the scenes and I got to help the Drama kids put them on and I got to help direct it and it was so cool and I got to watch all this happen and teach these students who were interested in theater how to put on good scenes and how to memorize lines and how to be natural on stage, and it was really cool. To be given that much responsibility to get other kids involved and actually help run the show was awesome. It was obvious Ms. Rollins believed in me and others and that motivated me even more to do my best to make sure our shows were a big success and our department kept growing.

Next, inspired by her focus group cohort members, Olivia shared her connection engagement experiences of freedom and responsibility as vice-president of Student Council (STUCO), largely due to her daily interactions with Mrs. Holmes, the lead sponsor of Student Council.

With Mrs. Holmes (Missy), she's a lot like Miss Rollins. I remember before STUCO started this year, her and Sarah (president of STUCO) and I met many times over the summer, because she always wanted to just make sure that we knew what we were getting into...she would sit us down and be like, 'You guys are great people, but you have to make sure that you're always, you have a positive attitude, and you have a positive outlook,' because people around the school would be looking at us, like all the

time. So she put that responsibility on us and gave us a lot of power to choose and plan what events we would do for the year and go talk to Mr. Scroggins (principal) about permission to put them on. Missy always reminded us, she just wanted to make sure that we're always super into whatever is going on, even if we have to fake it or just super like we have to be super positive about everything. And she's really good at like making sure that we're trying to include everyone, so she would, so she'd-- every time she talked to us, she would just-- it's really like student driven and she just wanted to make sure that we were always getting ready and trying to reach every part of the school. And she's really good at that.

I kept this focus group conversation going by making the following statement and by asking the ensuing questions.

You've talked a lot about these experiences right here. It seems like you're talking right now about connect and flow levels of experience, such as the importance of a relationship with the adult and opportunities for choice and responsibility. What would make a difference in the more compliant or commit levels? Can you imagine a math or history teacher coming up to you and saying, 'It's yours to win or lose?' What would make the difference or what's the difference in those environments between where you are 'all in' or what's the barrier causing you a sense of dread, of compliance?

Jan answered first with the following thoughts:

You know all five spoke about things that we're passionate about and things that we want to pursue in the long run. So I feel, if, I mean it's kind of up to us, if we're going to put ourselves out there and actually learn what they're telling us to learn instead of just kind of put in the short term, put it back out for the test, and then never think about it again. So it has to be a good balance with both the teacher challenging us and really pushing us to be the best we can in that subject or outside of school. But also we have to do it, it has to be us that has that drive.

However, Marcia followed up quickly to Jan's response by expressing her perception that more of the responsibility for a state of connection engagement belongs to the teacher to move you to higher levels of action and responsibility.

That's so hard, because the thing with a math or history class is I walk in with a different mindset than I do a theater class, which maybe I shouldn't. But at the same time if I walked into a math or history class and went like, 'Okay, let's go. I'm going to help this person with what to do today or I'm going to learn how to do this today,' maybe I'd learn or engage better, but maybe that mindset is a good thing. But, it seems when I walk into a math or history class, I'm expected to be more, not like professional, but I'm supposed to be willing to sit in my seat and be quiet so I can learn this, instead of you know, the opposite, you take the lead on this, you learn this, and share it with others.

I supervened on Marcia's response by asking the next two questions of the focus group.

"So, are you saying a positive mindset can overcome what you've said before about dreading going to certain classes? Do you think it's just on you after using the words drained, bored, tired, and hate to describe your classroom experiences?"

Olivia jumped in to respond with the following statement.

No. I mean like the teachers' always, like we said this, but if the teacher is bored and doesn't want to be there, we're bored and we don't want to be there. So I feel like-- it's like, obviously, there's a lot on us. But I feel like it's just as much on the teachers, because just, if they feel like, make us feel really good and happy in the morning and give us opportunities to do something, we'll be willing to learn with their teaching. Instead of just walking in and like, 'Get out your notes. Let's take notes.'

Peter succeeded Olivia's response by relating the ensuing sense making statement.

Yeah, I think it goes, both ways. It has to be a relationship between the student and teacher, because you can't put all the weight on to the teacher, because the students just will kind of sit there sit while the teacher is like literally bouncing around the classroom, trying to get everybody involved. But the student has to, has to have like some sort of passion in them or at least just want to learn. But it can't, it can't just all be the student also. But the teachers just can't, 'I got a worksheet for you guys, have fun with that.' It has to be like a good relationship between the student and the teacher.

Equally as important, Marcia replied with her following response to the ongoing conversation about mutual student learner and teacher responsibility for connection states of engagement.

And it's hard, because I think the teachers just need to be passionate and love what they're doing...And if you're passionate about something and you tell me why and you show me why, I'm going to listen to you and I'm going to take everything I can out of you, because that's my job as a student. And your job as a teacher is to do the same for me, for you to get to know me and understand why I'm so interested in theater education. You take that out of me and I take out of you your passions. Why the heck are you teaching Trig? And why are you so passionate about it? That's what I want to know and that's what I'm going to get out of the class and that's going to help me. If you're just sitting behind your desk and going, 'Okay. We're going to watch a video today on long division,' I don't know. I don't know what I'm talking about, but you do. But if there's—there's a difference between someone who's passionate about something and saying like, 'This is why I went for four years of college to learn, to teach you this.' It's so much more interesting talking

to someone who's passionate about something than not. Even if we're not the same kind of people.

Correspondingly, junior high student learner, Jason, shared his perception of the importance of freedom and responsibility for reaching connection stages of engagement due to those concepts serving as developmental needs for adolescents as they moved out of their childhood learning experiences and ascended to the secondary school level of learning.

In a flow classroom, I feel that if you have choice and freedom to do what you want and show how you are learning in a way that you want to show it, that's what helps you achieve a flow classroom. The choice of you know, I want to do this to show how I'm learning and the teacher allows it, that's something important that kids need. They need the choice to do what they want, because as you grow older you need that. When you were a little kid you didn't care about how much freedom you had. You just kind of did what you did, because you weren't thinking that well. You weren't as developed as you are now, as you grow old and you mature. So when the teacher was showing you how to do stuff you know you would be like, okay, this is fine. But as you grow older you want to have more choice and control. So you don't want to be spoon fed information. You want to have the freedom to do what you want and how you want to do it, even if there are parameters.

Also, Alice expressed the importance of opportunities for taking more responsibility with her learning and for making contributions towards a meaningful outcome or demonstration of her learning as vital aspects of reaching connections states of engagement. Alice described this perception when constructing meaning out of her Journalism class experience of working on monthly school broadcasts and the school yearbook.

So we would mostly just be out there on our own and we had to know how to manage our time. You had to take a lot of responsibility to know when to get things done and if you needed to reshoot things and stuff like that. I think being able to do what you wanted, like we would be able to come up with the ideas for the broadcast. So I think having more responsibility and having more voice I guess, is probably what made it a flow class. I think learning would be more clear if you always had an end goal to learn while you're learning, because that's when you want to actually achieve something instead of just putting it in your brain and then putting it back on a test. Then you're interested in learning, you want to learn and you're just more interested, you're more encouraged to learn, rather than just doing it because you have to.

Carol also perceived the significance of freedom and responsibility as a prime factor for experiencing a connection state of engagement when speaking to choices within the curriculum for what and how students chose to learn. Consequently, Carol made meaning out of such freedom and responsibility experiences leading to greater ownership of learning by students in such educational environments when sharing the following.

Some kids can't learn with the teacher writing on the whiteboard and talking to them and stuff. Mrs. Einstein (Science) wanted to make sure that they (students) learned how they need to learn...She gives you freedom not only on projects and stuff, but if you want to learn, she lets you pick the way you want to learn, because kids can go to the teacher talk or they can learn like, if they want to learn from the book or whatever. I think that definitely helps kids. Sometimes, you're allowed to work on projects with another person if you want to and you can, especially after you finish your first project that you do, you can dig deeper if you want to or do another project...you can research that and work on a project like that for the free time you have...I feel like it's a very free environment. I just feel more excited with that class for one, because I know that it's my project and even though it's a specific topic, I get to choose whatever I want within that topic. I just feel like I'm more interested and, I don't know, I'm more invested in whatever I'm doing during that time.

Likewise, Ben related the importance of freedom and responsibility for experiencing enjoyment within learning environments. Ben emphasized the significance of having an investment in the design process, goal-setting, and assessment of his learning for advancing to connection states of engagement in his Science class.

It's really fun to explain like your own thought process sometimes, because everyone has a different thought process. Like I wanted to do a wanted poster because bacteria in large numbers, it can be deadly. Just because of how much you got to choose and go down your own path and how you can relate it to your learning. She would always give you suggestions, but you could do almost anything you wanted, because she would always come up and talk to me first about what ideas I wanted to do. But she always said, 'Yes,' so it's really cool, because you could do basically whatever you want to like learn about in that class, as long as you showed her your learning.

Similarly, Mary spoke about the connection states of experience in her Photography class. Mary perceived a connection between the freedom to pursue an area of passion and reduced levels of stress or pressure and reaching higher states of engagement.

It's not, I mean, I have to be honest, it's not a whole lot of, like, straining, considering it is something that is taught. But it's not like history, you know what I mean? But I really enjoy it and it makes me, like if I'm behind in a project, I actually go, like, wait after school and finish it, because I want to finish it, and I want to, like... Being in the darkroom, I really enjoy being there. And even though I am, maybe I'm doing something due two days from now, and I should be working on the history lesson due tomorrow... I still find myself wanting to work on my photography. So... I guess it's like a sense of passion in what is worth more, per se, if that makes sense.

Cindy continued about the significance of freedom within classroom environments when sharing about her Honors Chemistry class. Cindy perceived even when the curriculum was primarily pre-determined if a teacher permitted flexible pace and space with the prescribed lesson, such freedom led to a higher state of connection engagement.

With Miss Rice, she basically teaches you what you're doing, and then she gives you worksheets. And then you do them on your own. And then you check them with her. And if you have questions, you ask her, but if you don't, you just, like move on. She lets you sit anywhere in the room, at your desk, at the lab stations, or with friends. So it's very self-paced. But she's still very open to helping you out.

Olivia also shared about the importance of choices within learning environments for flexible and comfortable learning opportunities for reaching connection states of engagement with her learning.

I love when classrooms have like different kinds of, types of seating or different, or a unique layout to them. Like for example, Mr. Kaufmann, he tries to put lots of different, arrangements out for you to be like the most comfortable, he has a couch and he has these fun buzz seats and he always has weird things that you can sit on while you're in class. And, like Ms. Holmes she is pretty chill like that too. It's like whenever you can be your most comfortable and it's chill. I don't like super formal environments and I find when I'm more comfortable, I'm more in to what I'm doing, if that makes sense.

Finally, many of the research participants talked about their perceived need for opportunities to choose interest-based learning topics or to participate in explorative experiences for reaching a connection state of engagement. Student learners appeared excited when given choices to pursue or explore learning opportunities, but frustrated when they lacked opportunities for such learning. Research participants also perceived the need during their secondary school

journey to discover sooner than later possible pathways of career exploration to choose from to experience the higher levels on the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C).

For instance, when I asked high school student learners in one of their focus group sessions if they knew their school mission statement, they all responded in the negative. So, I read the school mission statement to them, (Our mission is to empower students to achieve their maximum potential), followed up by asking the question, “Do you feel like your experiences with learning in school empowers you to achieve your maximum potential?” John’s outward reaction of a big smile and moving his head back and forth horizontally caught my immediate attention. Therefore, I began the follow-up to this posed question of the sophomore focus group, by asking John, “Why are you shaking your head, No?” John offered the following explanation for his body language and facial expression.

To me, it just seems like, you know if I want to reach my maximum potential, like some people know what they want to do. If those people want to take those classes that they know will better themselves later on down the road, so they don't have to be stressed about what they have to do to get ready for, or so they can get into college easier, or get a better score on the ACT, or start a job, then let those people take those classes. Don't make them take those classes (requirements) or offer them something to test out of the basic classes to where they can jumpstart their learning and get shot up there, so they can get more done in high school. Some people want that, I know I do.

Mary continued the conversation about reaching your maximum potential by sharing her ensuing sense making statement between learning inside and outside of school.

I think out-of-school learning usually has more to do with reaching your potential, because you get experiences that you've done or things that you've accomplished. But when you're in school you don't really get experiences. You get homework. And if you get it wrong, you get it wrong. While outside of school, you don't really, it's not like a judgment thing. And if there is, it's just from certain people, I suppose. But in school, it's like you get it or you don't. And if you don't, well that sucks for you. And outside of school it's like an experience and if you don't get it, well there's so many different ways you could do something well. And in school, if you don't get Math, like, there's no other way to do it. You're just -- if you don't know the formula, you're done, there's just that one way.

Cindy kept the flow of this conversation going by exasperatedly sharing her following thoughts.

I don't even know what I really want to do, but I feel like I can't even start thinking about it until my senior year. I still have so many classes that I have to take. I'm not even thinking about like, 'I'm taking this class because it's going to help me out later in life and reach my potential. I'm taking these classes because I have to and that's all I'm thinking about.' I can't even think of an example of something that should be offered here to help me with my future. I just feel like we need to have more opportunities earlier than our senior year.

In the junior's focus group session, Jan shared the following perception when trying to make sense out of her chosen opportunities on her passage through secondary school.

I think it's really more a trial and error thing. My freshman year my mom always told me I was really good at arguing and so I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. And then I took Business Law and I realized this is not where I want to be, I am not lawyer material and I don't like writing papers about that. So that wasn't for me. And so then I got involved in Medical Explorers that I fell in love with everything that's going on there and being in the hospital energized me. So it's really like, 'Not going to be a lawyer because I hate business law.' And so taking classes that might spark your interest like in Theater class, like anything, if the school offers something that someone can go explore, it really helps.

Peter concurred while expressing regret he wasn't able to take advantage of similar choices or opportunities to explore areas of interest for possible career pathways.

I feel that GOCAPS (Greater Ozarks Center for Advanced Professional Studies) is a great opportunity for kids to go if they have some sort of idea to like go and try it out. Because you're going to be pretty much in that field for three to four hours of the day. I wish I would had been able to take that, but I wasn't able to finish my schedule, but it really introduces you to what you're going to be doing in college. And that's really reassuring or it could be the opposite, but then you'd always know that you're not, you don't want to do that.

Marcia simply, yet profoundly, summarized the junior's focus group sensemaking perceptions of their journey through secondary school.

Yeah, and I think a problem is most students don't know what they want, you know? Like most freshmen coming in here they don't know, I knew I wanted to be in Theater, but it wasn't until having opportunities through Drama class and with Ms. Hollins, that if I don't make it as an actress maybe I'm supposed to be a Theater teacher. Not everybody knows what they want, it takes high school experiences to realize what you want.

Perhaps junior high student learner, Alice, captured the essence of the research participants' perception of the significance of freedom, autonomy, and responsibility opportunities during the secondary school experience when sharing this response.

I think whenever teachers give you more freedom that's when kids start to reveal themselves...I think whenever teachers give you choice and freedom I think that's when students feel able to express themselves more and figure out who they are.

Guidance and support relationships. Another significant perception of research participants for reaching connection states of engagement was acquiring the guidance and support of adults during their learning experiences across multiple socio-ecological environments. Although student learners were abundantly clear with their perceived need for freedom and responsibility throughout their learning environments, they also gave prominence to their perceived need for the availability of adult leadership and help to realize connection states of engagement, as evidenced with over 140 horizon experiences of guidance and support relationships. As Jason stated, “We want freedom, but not unlimited freedom. We need guidance too.”

Erin talked about her perception of the importance of adult guidance and support when contrasting two classes where teachers were attempting to give student learners more responsibility for their learning. In the first scenario, Erin described her English class where the two team teachers were implementing a project-based unit, but without what she perceived as clear enough expectations and directions. Erin stated,

I think they attempted to have like a flow classroom or a flow project sort of, but they didn't really know how to execute it very well. So I think a lot of kids were lost especially in my hour, a lot of kids had to ask the teacher like what to do and they were really confused. I think you're going to have to ease kids into that level of involvement and not just throw them out there expecting to know what to learn.

In Erin's second scenario, she described the perception in her Science class of structured independence, but without ever losing a sense of connection with the teacher.

In Science, Mrs. Einstein has this whiteboard with the weekly game plan and there isn't a test day, it's game day, because she likes to say, 'There's always a coach, like on a football field. The team members are not alone.' She'll have plans, but then we have a lot of choices with her plans and can go a lot of directions or even choose a completely different plan, but you have to get her approval. But she's always there, always walking around, always available, always checking in with you. And it's really nice to know that you have someone when you need them.

During the first high school junior focus group session, I asked the following question in an attempt to understand the bridge between freedom and responsibility on one side and adult guidance and support on the other. "Suppose your teachers asked you at the beginning of the school year across your various curriculum learning units, 'What do you want to learn about this topic?'" The research participants' answers revealed what appeared as conflicting perceptions between wanting freedom and responsibility, yet wanting the teacher to be more directive.

However, upon pressing for further clarification from the student learners to make sense and meaning of their experiences in various learning environments, they perceived the need for balance to achieve a connection state of engagement. For example, Marcia shared the following during this dialogue.

I think the only danger that comes with like, 'What do you want to learn,' is that I don't always know what I want to learn. You know, like I have things that I'm passionate about, but if I only took classes like Theater classes all day every day, it'd get really boring you know. If I'm sitting in an English class I don't know what I want to learn in an English class. You know, I don't know what books are out there, I don't know, and so having teachers aid into that and like give options I think is really important...but I think people are successful because the teachers, like, assist in that.

In the same way, Carol and Ben at the junior high level shared appreciation and admiration for how their Art class teacher provided options with their learning while also knowing the student learners did not have to start from scratch. Carol stated,

Mrs. Gonzales' would tell us what we would be doing that day like if we were painting or if we were doing a self-portrait...So I think that was really fun knowing the first couple of days we're learning how to do the project and then the rest of the week would be just like doing your own project.

Likewise, Ben shared,

It's definitely flow like when besides having the general topic, or project that we would have to do, we would be able to draw whatever we wanted. We could choose what kind of form and with the markers or color pencils or paints or water color. And Mrs. Gonzalez was always available for helping. She would always help and give you feedback along the way no matter what.

Also, Ben referred to his Journalism class experience where he appreciated the broad range of ideas student learners were allowed to submit for video broadcasts and yearbook pages. However, Ben also perceived he wasn't sure where the products the student learners were creating would've ended up without the innovative inputs of the teacher.

Mr. Hood's ideas were also really awesome, because like the interactivity in the yearbook with QR codes, we probably wouldn't have thought to do that at all and not have been able to include all of the content we did. But, Mr. Hood really wanted to do it and so, he sort of got us on board that boat and before long we were working on not just the yearbook, but we were working on the codes and embedding other details throughout the yearbook.

Another essential guidance and support perception for experiencing connection levels of engagement was the perception from research participants of the ability of teachers to reduce the stress of and increase the hope of student learners. This perception emerged throughout individual and focus group interviews when student learners were asked to contrast their learning experiences between the elementary and secondary levels of school. Research participants began by sharing their anxieties over perceived pressure to obtain both local and nationally recognized academic markers of achievement as measures of success to deem them prepared for post-secondary success.

For example, high school sophomore, Elizabeth shared the following response:

I just feel like elementary was so fun because they're not pushing or saying constantly you're about to start your life or you're about to go to college or high school or just things like that. And so it was fun, because you didn't worry about that yet. They didn't make you worry about things like that and you just went to recess and had fun. And then junior high, you have to start caring about your grades more, because they're like, 'High school is about to start and you need to practice, practice, practice.' And then when high school came, they're like, 'College is next so you're going to take the ACT, you're going to take this practice test. Just like the EOC (End of Course State Exam), your grades matter now.' And so you really have that pressure on you to get good grades and do good on the EOC. Because if you don't get good grades or you don't do good on the EOC, you feel like you didn't reach those expectations that they're pushing at you.

Secondary school learners repeatedly expressed esteem for teachers who possessed the ability to reduce the perceived peril for students to prove their learning while simultaneously empowering them they could improve their learning (Watkins, 2016). Such cultivation of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2009) was perceived by student learners as mutually intentional and serendipitous on the part of their teachers. Elizabeth highlighted this perception when talking about the type of feedback her English teacher provided her in place of supposed pressure about grades. "We did No Red Ink assignments, whether working on grammar or just because we wrote a lot of papers. So I enjoyed that class a lot because of the approach of the teacher."

When asked to explain what she meant by No Red Ink assignments, Elizabeth responded,

I just think that you're not wrong in that class. You're not going to be wrong on something, but instead she gives you feedback to improve and she makes you feel like you can do anything in that class. There's no dumb answer or something. If you say something, she connects back with you. She's like, 'Yeah, that's good, I never would of thought of it that way. That's a good answer.' Just like things like that. Just showing she cares, makes you want to participate in that class. Kids who normally wouldn't participate, they participate because she shows she's there to help us and that she cares and she's listening. You don't get discouraged, because she always saying, 'You just don't have it yet, but you will, just keep trying.'

Sensing research participants' perceived stress level over grades and grade point averages for honor roll and honor organization recognition, I probed a little deeper about this pressure.

So it sounds like there's a lot of pressure to do well. I mean from listening to your daily experience of going throughout a school day, you kind of described what's going on

in the classes, sometimes you're moving around, but most of the time you're sitting. It sounds like the teachers are doing a lot of the direction of what's happening and you're just taking notes or following and working on it, so overall, do you feel like your stress level has gone up since coming into high school?

High school junior, Jan, responded first by sharing her gratefulness for teachers who get that student learners' lives don't just center on that sole teacher's class while expressing frustration with teachers who don't consider that fact.

I think the mix of a little bit of push and a little bit of understanding is nice, because we're just high schoolers and our whole entire life isn't dedicated to this single class, because we have seven other classes that we need to get into, we have jobs that we need to get into, we have family, and we have sports, and we have activities that they kind of understand, but they also know that it's possible for us to reach our potential. I think by making things a little challenging is good, but not too intense where everyone is freaking out. Sometimes, teachers give you assignments and everyone is freaking out about it because it's forever long and it sounds difficult. Those (teachers) don't really care, they're like, 'It's possible so just get it done.' So, people stress out, and they stay up real late. I know I stay up for hours doing something that I'm so upset about.

Elizabeth answered with similar concerns of more stress at the high school level and the need for teacher empathy and understanding as the guidance and support she perceived was so important for moving from compliance to connection stages of engagement.

Yeah, definitely, because it's like 70% is test or something. And then 20% is homework and quizzes. And so you're like, 'I have to do good on this test,' or your grade will go down. So a lot of pressure is on you especially as an athlete because if you have games or something, you have to go to the game and you'll get home at say 10:00 p.m., and then you'll have to stay up, take a shower, do your homework. And then you have to wake up early. Sometimes, I'll have a game on Tuesday, I'll get home late, and then do homework, and I'll have to wake up early for Student Council. So it's just stressful, because there's just so much going on. But I don't know. I feel like they just expect us to get good grades and things like that. Especially with NHS (National Honor Society), you have to reach certain requirements. I understand, but it's just stressful because as a student, I want to be in that and I want to get a high GPA and get grades and things like that.

As a junior and senior to be, Marcia likewise expressed thankfulness for teachers and adults who understood she had multiple commitments in her life which were equally important to her.

I've got things that I find more important than some of my classes, because I think you know, English is important, but so is Algebra, so is, I've got things that I care about and I'm passionate about and not being able to work on those things during classes is hard. But teachers who understand that, like there was earlier this year I had to learn a show in a week and so I skipped class. Yeah, whatever, I just couldn't do a show, so I learned it in three days and I got out of classes, some of my classes, because they were understanding. They're like, 'I understand that you're passionate about this, so since this is important to you, I'll help you with this later. Go.'

However, experiences of perceived stress were not limited to high school research participants as student learners at the junior high level also related angst and anxiety when in some of their learning environments. Alice relayed her perceived frustration over having to work through prepared Science lessons loaded into the school's learning management system with little to no guidance from the teacher. Alice felt mutually thwarted through this experience because the teacher allowed little to no social interaction among peers during the learning process.

He had like a whiteboard and he would have daily goals posted for us and so basically once he was done he would tell us to get to work and on Canvas he had note links and everything and we would have to take notes in our notebooks. He wouldn't teach it to us or talk to us about it, we would just have to find links and we had a resource page that we would use, and we would like have to learn it all by ourselves. I definitely think a lot of kids struggled with that, because like in elementary school we were so used to teacher teaching us, telling us what we were supposed to do. And if we started to ask someone sitting near us for help, because we didn't understand something, he would tell us to be quiet, get back to work, and do our own work.

When I asked Alice how that worked for her and how she felt during that experience, she responded,

I didn't fully understand some things and you could ask him questions, but then he would just lead you to more things online, and not necessarily explain it to you and sometimes you need someone to explain it to you...I just wanted to leave that class.

Erin expressed similar frustrations from her junior high history and science classes because there were times she didn't understand the learning concepts of a particular assignment. When Erin was instructed by the teacher to be more independent, she perceived such words as a lack of guidance and support.

When I started reading the textbook, but I couldn't find an answer I would ask the teachers for help and they would always tell me to go look back in the textbook because it is always there. Alice, what you just said reminded me that I wanted help but he never gave it to me. That also happened in Science class. If I needed to ask for help the teacher would always come up to me and say something like 'You like your teachers teaching you things,' which is true, I do like to hear it and then I know what I am learning is right. Because I do not trust myself to learn something and know it's right. So I want to know what I am learning is right. So he kept telling me how he just wanted me to become like an adult and take more responsibility, but like you said with elementary it is hard because you always had the teacher telling you what you need to learn. So it was like all of a sudden pushing all this stuff on me that I should become an adult.

Carol added to her junior high focus group participants' thinking by adding her following sense making statement for reaching connection stages of engagement.

I think a good relationship with the teacher is really important though, because kids feel more motivated to learn if the teacher understands that they just can't always get it on their own, maybe can't grasp a certain topic, at least the first time, and they need further help, need someone to explain it to them. They need help, because they are struggling in this class and you need the teacher to be personally understanding, okay? And they will help instead of just saying you should have gotten your work done whenever I gave you time or something like that.

Demonstrating connection states of engagement for learning exist across multiple socio-ecological environments, research participants expressed when school became stressful they knew they had the nurturing guidance and support of their parents and other family members. Upon hearing of student learner anxiety due to learning experiences at school, I asked if the student learners could share a story or experience of a non-school source of guidance and support. Marcia began first by sharing about her relationship with her parents.

My mom always tries to remind me that like, you're doing a good job as long as you're giving your 100%, you're doing a good job, but make sure that you can get a good

education later on, because my mom didn't graduate from college and so she's really onto me about, 'You have the brains. You've got, like the gall. You can go graduate and you can have a good education and you can support your family. And so make sure that you are paying your dues now so you can have fun later. In college you can do what you want. You can have all the fun that you want, because you'll have the previous knowledge to do that.' And so she always pushes me to do that. So is my Dad. They're both really supportive, but if I'm like, 'Mom I just don't understand what I'm learning in Algebra or in Chemistry. I don't know why I need to know this.' She's like, 'Sarah, you need to know it so you don't have to know it later. You need to get over with it now and it's boring and it's hard, but you're going to be able to do so much more later if you can get past this class.' So it's helpful just because they're very supportive and they're like, 'You've got a future. You've got stuff you can look forward to. This is hard now, but look what you can do later.'

When relaying her home environment guidance and support experience, high school junior, Olivia was quick to contrast her mom's approach to difficulties at school with Marcia's mom.

My mom is definitely kind of different in that. I'll like stress myself out over how busy I am with Student Council or like school or just everything altogether and my mom will like sit me down and be like, 'Settle down, take a breather. Go have fun. You can do this. You'll get it done.' She just, I mean I stress myself out a lot and so she's really good about like, calming me down and making sure I'm okay.

Jan continued the home support conversation by sharing how she knew her parents loved and were always there for her, but it was more her little sister who was her go to support person when times become stressful at school.

I'll talk to my sister, because she's like my best friend and so I talk to her more than my parents, even though I know she's only fourteen, but she gives me better advice than most, like anyone. She's like, 'Jan, calm down. It's okay.' Like when I'm stressing out over something. I know like last night, I was up late doing English after getting back late from a road trip soccer game and she woke up at two in the morning when I was still working and she was like, 'Can I do anything for you?' And so knowing that I have that support and if I need something, my family will do anything for me.

Jason, at the junior high level, shared a similar picture of confidence building and reassuring words coming from his parents in support of his school successes and challenges.

When I come home and share kind of the re-living, like different experiences at school and telling them I did something pretty cool, that's a sense of pride you know.

They are interested in what I'm doing at school and how I'm doing, so I feel loved and I know that they actually care about me. Instead of me just going to school every day because it's the law. They actually care that I'm getting an education and they know that I'm doing well in school and are willing to listen to me if I'm having any difficulties.

Lastly, research participants conceptualized supportive environments including relational interactions between peers as well as opportunities to build good relationships with teachers. Ben lent his perception to the conversation of how peer relationships were another essential means of guidance and support when sharing the following experience at the junior high level.

I really enjoy classes which allow me to get my ideas out and a lot of times hear other peoples' ideas and so that would sort of eventually like reshape the way that I would think of my own ideas. Interacting with others is really a good way for me to learn, so I really like classes where we do get to work in groups and talk with each other.

Back at the high school level of learning, Jan shared her perception of reaching a connection state of engagement in her Physiology class due to the supportive nature of the entire class. Jan stated her, and her classmates were serious about helping each other acquire the critical knowledge and skills learned in the class as part of a cohort of learners who were all going into medical fields of study or work after their post-secondary careers. Jan stated, "I feel like I'm really connected to the people in that class as we all have the same interests and we all help pull each other along to get the learning."

Mary, high school sophomore, echoed similar perceived interpersonal and collaborative interaction needs for reaching connection stages of engagement in her learning environments. In talking about the increased level of difficulty in her English class, Mary appeared more than okay with such challenges due to having the active support of her teacher and classmates.

In my English class we definitely get in the flow, because it's a lot of interaction, and it's not really an easy class, but it's a hard class. You still have to like go home and do stuff and show up prepared to be ready for the interacting of discussions. But the teacher is super passionate and helps guide the entire experience in that class. So, considering it is a little more challenging is alright and I would say it is flow, because I'm willing to stay up until 10:30 p.m., finishing up my reading, because I want to finish it so I can

interact the next day, even though I could live without reading like 20 pages. But for that class it is worth it to have that kind of interactive experience.

Cindy, a sophomore classmate, contributed a comparable perception when talking about teachers needing a passion for helping their student learners and not just being excited about their content area.

Well, some teachers seem to only want to teach which sounds kind of weird coming out of my mouth, but it's like they're here to teach a subject, and that's what they're all here to do in reality, I guess. But if they were into having relationships with the students just as much, I think they would be teaching a little more like three dimensional and it gives everyone else a better environment, because if the teacher is just there to teach you, basically it's like talking to a brick wall, because nothing's really bouncing back. But if there is a good communication between the students and the teacher, then they (student learners) seem to generally want to learn, because it gives it a little bit of a better environment for learning.

High school sophomore, John, equally shared a definite disconnect with teachers whom he perceived were not leading with a learner-centered approach. Reflecting about the beginning of the school year inquiries from teachers about who learners are, how they like to learn, and other getting to know you type of requests, John shared the following perception.

Yeah, I was gonna say in high school, it just seems like most of the teachers who ask all of that first of the year stuff, I mean it's not all of them, but it's just seems like most of them don't really take that information seriously. They just push it to the side, lock it up, and don't ever look at it again. In high school, in most of the classes that I've had you have to really adapt to how the teacher teaches. It's not really the other way around. It's not the teacher giving into how you want to learn, it's normally you have to adapt to how they teach, which sometimes can be hard because it takes a few months or even the first semester to even get used to the way they teach, which is sometimes difficult, and stressful for kids. You're sitting there wondering, 'This stuff is hard for me, but it's easy for this kid.' Some kids, their learning styles are the way the teacher already teaches, but yours is different.

Peter, high school junior, also spoke up about his perception of the need for supportive and interactive peer to peer relationships as well as with teachers to reach a state of connection experience in his learning environments.

Sometimes you can be up to a flow, just because if you have the whole class in on

something, in English we talk about morals or just anything about a book and just have discussions that sometimes turn into arguments and obviously we can just discuss for the whole entire hour and not even really notice that the hour's going by so fast, because we're having such an in-depth discussion and it could even lead to things like longer through the day talking to your friends about that same discussion that you were having earlier.

Olivia, a junior classmate, fittingly made sense of this dialogue with her closing perceptual remarks about teaching and learning being a transactional experience. “I mean, it's definitely more fun whenever you have a strong connection with like the class and the teacher, when you get feedback, good or bad, because it gets you really involved with it.”

Purpose and relevance. The last sub-category of the connection level of engagement which emerged from the horizon experiences of research participants was the importance of purposeful and relevant learning activities for student learners, notching over 100 horizon experiences during this study. Student learners were keen to realize whether their classroom, school, home, or community experiences had a clear purpose or relevance for either their current or future stations in life. Secondary school learners at both the junior high and high school levels appeared confident in identifying what they saw as congruent experiences of learning for their young lives, whether or not their adult counterparts were able to relate a clear purpose or future relevance for the presented curriculum.

For example, junior high research participants were asked during their first focus group meeting what types of learning experiences enabled them to reach a connection level of engagement, and the student learners responded with a consensus perception of freedom to pursue interest-based learning opportunities. Exploring for further characteristics of a connection state of engagement, I asked the research participants the succeeding follow-up questions.

Are there other things that can get you to a state of a connection or flow engagement other than just interest? What about classes that you are not as interested in? Can you get to a flow state in those classes and if so what allows you to get there? What is it that you are doing that makes the class a connect or flow level experience of engagement?

Ben began our ensuing dialogue by relating his intriguing perceptual insights of the need for purposeful learning, even in one his classes of keen personal interest. His perceptions were followed up with my new sense making inquiries.

Ben: Well, math actually is one of my primary interests. I really like math and I'm on the Math Team, but it's another one of those classes where you're just sort of like, you're sat down, you're taught, and then you would just get problem, after problem, after problem, for like the homework and stuff to do. But you feel like your brain just goes on autopilot almost. You can still work on the problem, but you're also thinking about other things at the same time and you will be getting work done and you won't even realize it. But we never really learned how to apply mathematics to real life situations, other than like word problems. But we would very rarely work on word problems

Mr. Bronn: Okay. So describe that experience. Is your math class experience a connect or flow level of engagement?

Ben: Depends on the work.

Mr. Bronn: You say that a lot, 'We've got to get our work done.' What do you mean by work?

Ben: It depends on the work, whether it is like something that really interests you or if it is just one thing after another whenever it comes to math or whenever you have to do problem after problem after problem. It is a repetitive process at that point just to make sure you get it done on time for the next day.

Mr. Bronn: So how do you feel when you're, when you say, you come in, you're sat down, the teacher gives you the explanation and then, you just go straight to working on the problems. You said you feel like you're on auto-pilot. Can you explain what you mean by auto-pilot? Are there any other feeling words you would use to express what you mean by auto-pilot or any other feelings you experience in that class?

Ben: It gets pretty boring after a while and I don't really see the point of it, because then you're doing that over and over and over. And a lot of the times, the homework, it's just, it's homework, after homework, after homework. I think like the only time that we didn't really have homework in that class was on the weekends, which even sometimes, we still have it.

Mr. Bronn: What would you prefer? What could be an alternative way of learning, to use your phrase, ‘See the point of it?’

Ben: Like being able to, some of it would be really cool being like in reverse, taking a problem or coming up with your own real life problem and then solving that instead. Because we were saying we never really figure it out, how to apply these mathematics to real life. So if we were to create a real life instance maybe something would happen or it would be fun, even though you have other subjects involved, like physics, like wind resistance and all that, the quadratic formula and equation, just like going over that or going outside and tossing the ball up in the air and measuring the distance or something.

Mr. Bronn: So a project-based math approach and having an actual design, a process, and product for math?

Ben: Yes.

Mr. Bronn: You think you would learn more and retain it?

Ben: Yes because I know that I am more of a hands-on person, but also, I think that you would actually see a purpose for your learning and that always helps me hold the learning in my memory, knowing this is important and I’m going to actually use this later. Now some people can like see and hear a concept better to remember it better than they do with hands on stuff. But whenever you are engineering it or coming up with a problem I really think you would retain the information better, because you are coming up with it and you are having to remember it while also creating it.

Research participants at the high school also expressed attaining to higher levels of engagement when learners could see a purpose and relevance for learning beyond the experience counting as a quiz, test, class grade, or course credit. Jan spoke of the importance of purpose and relevance for her learning when sharing during her second focus group interview.

Personally, I love to have hands-on experiences and be like in an environment that I know that's going to help me pursue what I want to pursue. So I know I've wanted to go into the medical field since like sophomore year and so next year I'm going to be in a program called GOCAPS. I get to be in the hospital for the first three hours of my day and I'm going to be in there like taking classes that are going to help me pursue becoming a PA (physician assistant). I'll get to go into surgery and I'll get to like observe the surgeries and then we do like a project on what do you see that needs to be changed in the hospital and then we take months of like research to figure that out...So I'm super excited for that next year, because I'll be able to actually see a purpose for what I'm doing and not just have to sit in a classroom, because I can't, like, sit still and just not do anything it's just not my personality. So having like those teachers that are going to give us hand-on experiences and they're going to really tell us, ‘Okay this is going to help you in

the future,' like, 'This is how you can apply this to life.' I know that helps me a lot more than just being, 'Okay, learn this, we'll have a test;' okay that's completely short-term memory, I'm not going to remember that next week. So, hands-on experiences and like really engaging and feeling like you're in an environment where you can like express yourself helps a lot.

Marcia had similar vigorous sentiments about purposeful learning when looking ahead to her A plus teacher aide experience during her upcoming senior year and making sense of other disciplines becoming suddenly more relevant.

I'm going to be A plusing a Theater class next year, like a Drama One class, and so I've been talking with Miss Hollins about what should we teach, what should we do, like what assignments should we have...So if we have a set-building day in Advanced Tech and you have to start building a staircase and you need to know how much to like...you need math for that, you need to know how many inches are like in a foot and you need to have basic math to do well in this. You need to have a basic understanding of like electricity to do well in lights and sound. You need a good English grade to do well in this reading category, so knowing that I have to do well in these classes if I want to do better, especially in my future, because I want to be a theater teacher or like some kind of theater educator, I have to do well in so many different areas and that helps drive me, you know. I don't always look forward to English, but knowing that if I can become a better reader and understand the text of different books or like different shows, then I'm going to pay more attention in English. You know, like I've got a purpose for going to my classes.

Another perceived area of highly purposeful and relevant learning experiences were research participants' involvements in school activities. Whether in athletics, fine or practical arts, clubs, or service organizations, student learners were passionate about the purposeful learning they walked away with by participating in school activities. When asked, "What are some of the things that you've learned and will take away from your school activities which will help you in college, career, or life?"

High school junior, Greg, began the sharing on the relevance of learning via school activities by relaying his perception of acquiring significant leadership skills.

I think probably the biggest one for me in being a quarterback was knowing a leader has to lead by example and do everything the right way. But also, I have to be a vocal leader, on and off the field. And I think that is going to help me in college and my career

throughout my life, just being able to rally a group together towards one, towards a goal and try to accomplish that goal. And just be a leader in life, I guess, I think that'll help. That's probably the biggest thing I'll take away from activities.

Peter, his junior classmate, jumped in next, making sense of his cross country athletic experience.

I would say the biggest thing was probably perseverance. Just that I know, like in cross-country, it's not even just like physically, it's like a full mental game. I know if I get-- if I start thinking negatively when I'm running, I'll just have a terrible race. I'll just shut down in the middle of the 5K and probably be one of my worst times. So it's one of those things that you just have to fight and keep telling yourself that you can and that's not just for cross country, it's for any sport. If you haven't persevered a little bit, then you're probably not doing it right.

Jan continued the dialogue by echoing perceptions of obtaining significant leadership experience and skill from her role as soccer team captain.

I'll kind of agree with Greg. Like being captain of the soccer team, being someone who's been around soccer longer than most of the coaches. I feel like I do have to step up and be like that leader... You have to learn how to benefit your team and make sure everyone strives to be the best they can be, because ultimately that is the goal on how everyone comes together for the one goal. But you have to go about it in the right way and make sure like people aren't going to hate you, but you also have to be that person, okay, like you have to learn how to call people out in the right way. And that's how you're going to thrive.

Marcia also agreed with her junior focus group peers with her perception of the purposeful learning of vital leadership skills through her participation in school activities.

Definitely leadership skills. I'm Drama Club President next year, which means I'm working with a committee of people to help make our shows are the best they can be and to get other people involved in theater. But also with teamwork comes humility. I know that like saying, 'I am humble,' is not very humble. But like it humbles me every single time I go into that room, because I know I'm not the best in the room at everything. There's someone better at something and we are all needed, so that helps so much, especially for someone who wants to go into that field. You can never walk in and just be like, 'Okay. So sit down, people. And I'm going to wow you with this.' Because you're never ever going to be the best in the room at everything. And so you have to take the best of people to make what you're doing the best.

One final conversation which highlighted the critical importance of purposeful and relevant learning experiences for reaching connection levels of engagement dealt with the reoccurring theme of frustration, frustration seemingly to the point of exhaustion and desperation. This perceptual experience appeared to materialize most clearly with the high school research participants due to the length and breadth of their secondary school experience in comparison to their junior high colleagues. For instance, when the sophomore focus group was restructuring their daily school experience through the use of the grand tour interview protocol, frustration after frustration kept emerging. Therefore, I inquired of them,

What do you think is driving all of this apparent frustration with your learning experiences at the secondary level of school? It sounds like this has been on the increase. I hear you saying, 'I'm sitting here in the dark. I don't know what we're doing. What's the purpose of all this? I come to school to learn, but...' Did you have this sense of frustration in elementary school and junior high?

At this critical moment, the high school student learners relentlessly poured out a barrage of perceptions and emotions which ostensibly had been waiting for release. Elizabeth responded first with her meaning-making perception of the differences between elementary and secondary school.

I think junior high was like a fun time for me because you're like transitioning into something that you aren't used to. So it's different. And you got to see, like, seven different teachers a day. And so it was, like, cool to meet different teachers and their personalities and how they wanted to teach you. So I think junior high was a fun time for me. But now, like, high school, it's not as fun. And I don't enjoy it as much.

John continued,

Yeah. And I think that's mostly just because you're, like she said, transitioning. But it's more than that, it's building up in you. Like, you're not realizing it, just because it's all new. And you're, like, still trying to figure things out. But it's slowly building up and then when you get into high school, it just hits you.

So I stated, “Interesting. What hits you?” Elizabeth quickly answered with the response, “Like, same old, same old. I just go through the motions in high school now and can’t see where it’s all leading.” Mary kept the momentum flowing with her sense making reply.

Yeah, I feel like school, especially high school, while elementary school and junior high go like, ‘Okay, we’re going to work on this now. You need to know this.’ But in high school it’s like, ‘Okay, you have to get ready for college. And you’re going to have to do this with your life, with yourself.’ And you’re stressing about, ‘Well, if I don’t know this, then I’m not going to know,’ which means I’m not going to know this. So you find yourself slowly, like, a domino effect, you’re like, ‘Okay, well now I have to figure out what college I’m going to and I don’t know if I’m even like good enough to go to this college.’ And all the time you’re going, ‘Why am I even doing this? What is it all for?’ When in elementary school, you’re like, ‘Oh, I just have to know how to build this block,’ or, ‘I’ve got to know how to find the area of this right now.’ The focus is on right now. But in high school, I feel like it’s more future based. So you start to stress and you check your grades a lot more often than you do in junior high. And you just sit there like, ‘Okay, I need to get this up to an A,’ instead of like, ‘This is why this is important, I get this.’

So I followed up with a clarifying response and the ensuing question.

So what I hear you saying is your current learning environments can be very future based. So if that’s your perception that, ‘Okay, I’m doing this and I may not see the purpose for it other than being told it’s for my future,’ are you saying you may not be at a connect or flow level of engagement, but you’ll do something because you know it’s for your future? Is that what you’re saying?

John answered in the affirmative with his meaning-making account.

Yeah, I think that’s pretty much it. Another reason why you sort of want to learn is because you know, ‘Hey, maybe I want to do this someday.’ So you’re like, ‘I should probably learn how to do this,’ or something like that.

Still not sure I understood all of the focus group participants’ meaning behind their statements, I replied with the following probe.

So in dance, Cindy, I’m trying to tie it all together. I’m trying to understand how you’re feeling about getting ready for your future versus doing what you really like now. Because it seems a little confusing. Intuitively, I’m a little confused about how much of your future is going to be involved in like, let’s say, being a professional dancer?

Cindy swiftly responded, “Probably noooooone of it. I might, if I can get a job in a show or something, like while I'm in college.”

Accordingly, I kept inquiring,

But isn't high school all about your future? Why are you wasting your time? [All of the participants' laugh]. See how I'm trying to make that connection? If it isn't related to your future, then why are you doing dance? I'm not saying that it's a waste of time. But I'm almost wondering if you, is that how you feel or think? It doesn't sound like you feel dance is a waste of time at all.

Cindy retorted,

Yeah, I feel, I mostly feel like school is more of a waste of time than dance is, even though I'm going to use school more than dance in my future. I don't know, I feel like sometimes I just go to school and I just kind of sit there, and everything just kind of like goes right through me... I don't know.

Elizabeth joined in, “Like, we feel like some things we learn are so pointless.”

Cindy agrees, “Yeah.”

Elizabeth continues, “Like you'll be sitting, then you're like, ‘Why? Like, why am I learning this? When will I use it?’”

Mary responds,

Yeah, it's kind of like history. I don't know what I'm going to do with my life. Like, whether that be college or a job, or whatever. But I know for a fact I am not going to be like a History major. So I don't see like what's the point.

John apparently agreed when he stated, “You're like, ‘Why do I need to know all of these different things about the Russian Catholic Orthodox Church?’” [Laughter from the other student learners]. “And you're just like, ‘What does this have to do with later on down the road?’”

Listening intently, I attempted to make another sense making inquiry with the following question.

Do you think there's any, I'm listening to what's going on, when you're in those experiences, I'm trying to make sense of it. But what is the connection between your school, your teachers, your adults here, helping you reach an understanding of the purpose of your learning experiences for reaching higher levels of engagement?

Mary responded first, "It's like an uphill run for a long time, then you're on a flat ground. And then once you hit that in your life, after college, job, family. It's like downhill. You feel comfortable." John replied, "Yeah, but not like a bad downhill." Cindy agreed, "Yeah, like it's really easy to go."

Mary continued,

Yeah so I guess, if you survive the uphill run, and find yourself in the mountains, in a metaphorical way, in college and everything else you might hit a few bumps. But once you hit that point in your life where you're like 'Okay, this is, this is how I want to live. This is what I've been dreaming of doing with these people, or with this job,' or whatever. You feel like you're in a downhill run or ride, whatever you want to say.

I responded, "Like your sweet spot, like you found your purpose?"

John affirmed both sentiments when stating,

Yeah. If you're a kid, you're on that flat, at the beginning of your life. Then, you go through elementary school. It's not like that much of an uphill. When you hit junior high, it gets a little steeper and then high school even more steep, and then college maybe even steeper. But when you know what you want to do, it starts to flatten out again, and it becomes easier when you know what you want to do. Once you are who you want to be, that's when it hits that downhill, I feel like.

I continued,

So, that's your goal? Is that probably what the high school mission means when stating, '...reaching your maximum potential,' is you have found your sweet spot? You've found your purpose, this is what I'm gonna be doing, this is who I was meant to be? If so, how well are we doing as a school system to help you find that and help you learn more about that and get into it? And are we doing it early enough?

John developed the following perceptual meaning out of his school experience in response to the inquiry.

I think our school is more focused on getting us the energy to go up the hill, but they're not giving us the tools to shorten the hill, the distance to the top of the hill, which is what

I think what we need to be doing. We need to be shortening the time to where we know what we're going to do, to where we find our purpose, so we can live as much of our life in what we want to do. What I think our school is more focused on is giving us the energy and trying to make school as best as possible for everyone to where we can have an enjoyable time up the hill. But, no matter what, how you look at, you're still going up the hill.

Mary bolstered this sense making experience with her final reflection of the session.

I remember in eighth grade and junior high, and even in elementary school, where we would just take those tests that would let you know what fields you'd be the best in, or even what type of learner you are. I remember that time, getting something bizarre, and I was like, 'Uh, I don't really know,' but it is something that I would consider now, but at the time I didn't really know. If I didn't remember that I wouldn't have kept that in the back of my mind. Now, I feel like the last test I took of one of those was in the eighth grade. I know it's a little more important in high school to know, because it's coming up to the point where you're going to have to know. I feel like junior high and intermediate and all that is a good time where you start developing yourself as a person. It almost kind of drops off at high school, you're going to have to be smart, you're going to have to take and pass all these classes to get all your credits. But then, you just drift off to the fact that you don't know what you're working towards, you just know you're working towards something.

Summary

Chapter four presented the perceptions of engagement held by secondary school research participants involved in this dissertation in practice study. Five eighth graders, four sophomores, and five juniors from a large school district in rural Missouri utilized their understanding of the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C) to conceive engagement in the following ways:

1. Compliance as a form of engagement
 - a. Passivity as a form of compliance
 - b. Disinterest as a form of compliance
 - c. Boredom as a form of compliance
 - d. Controlled as a form of compliance
2. Connection as a form of engagement
 - a. The importance of the teacher for reaching engagement

- b. Engagement as possessing freedom and responsibility opportunities
- c. Engagement as a response to guidance and support relationships
- d. Engagement as purpose and relevance

I analyzed the words and perceptions of the research participants found within the data from individual interviews, focus groups, and writing samples and transformed them into categories of meaning from my inferences of student learners' lived experiences of engagement (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Observing the research participants' conduct during the data collection process, such as body language, tone of voice, moods, and facial expressions, were also considered an important part of the data analysis. Next, I triangulated the data from all three sources of perceptions, individual interviews, focus groups, and writing samples, to strive for accuracy in the sense making process of coding and theme categorization. The categorization of themes is consistent within phenomenological research practice which aims to capture the essence of a phenomena experienced by research participants from a specific context (Creswell, 2013); in this case, secondary school learners who were involved across multiple socio-ecological contexts, including in classrooms and school activities, at home, and in the community.

The graphic representation (Figure 6) of the research participants' perceptions of engagement illustrates that the lived experienced themes are interrelated and often overlap. While the preponderance of perceptual data from research participants revealed a compliant state of engagement throughout their secondary school experience, student learners were also highly optimistic while sharing substantial perceptual data revealing connection states of engagement. Although student learners described doing what was asked of them, no matter how passive, disinterested, bored, or controlled they perceived to appear during compliant states of

engagement, research participants also cited proactive teacher leadership, freedom of choice and increased responsibility for learning, guidance and support relationships, and purposeful and relevant learning experiences as positive states of connection engagement.

Overall, the research findings of this study offered significant insight into how learners' feel about their own and other student learners' engagement levels across multiple socio-ecological environments. The research participants were able to share in great detail their perceptions of what influences today's secondary school learners reaching the higher levels of connection engagement. Likewise, research participants described in great detail their perceived negative states of experience during the lower level of compliance engagement and how such experiences impact today's secondary school learners. Chapter five includes presenting interpretive conclusions based upon cyclical analysis of the data as well as offering actionable recommendations aligned with research findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Chapter Five Analysis and Recommendations

Introduction

The primary purpose of research is learning; thus qualitative studies begin with inquiry and the data generated informs our questions and helps us understand a specific phenomenon through sense making (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Saldana, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to make sense of what engages secondary learners in their educational experience and seek to understand if a decline in engagement occurs for learners as they proceed throughout their secondary school journey. By identifying how students described their experiences of engagement and understanding the possible factors contributing to student engagement from the voices of learners, essential action steps for how to develop learner-centered environments (conceptual framework) could become available.

Such findings are significant because knowing the perceptions of secondary school learners for what facilitates their engagement at the classroom, school, family, and community levels could enhance students' experiences of learning. Thus, a naturalistic inquiry process of generating qualitative data from 14 secondary school learners, regarded as the experts of their own lived experiences of engagement, was used in hopes that a better understanding of the perceived engagement stages of learners would provide insights on how to encourage higher levels of engagement for preparing success ready graduates.

The ensuing process was followed during this dissertation in practice study:

- Reviewing the literature concerning engagement,
- Selecting and refining the research protocol by asking a pilot group of junior high student learners the individual and focus group questions, followed by noteworthy

collaboration with my dissertation chair and committee during the research defense proposal process;

- Choosing a purposeful sample, and collecting and generating data,
- Analyzing the findings by coding and categorizing the raw data from the full interview transcriptions with the “constant comparison” and “problem-posing” methods (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 191), believing such a continual focus on the horizon qualities of the lived experiences under investigation would reveal the “essential nature” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 91) of the phenomena;
- Organizing the findings first by research questions and secondly by themed categories and sub-categories, guided by the learner-centered conceptual framework as described in chapter two;
- Making and presenting inferences from the findings in chapter four to tell the story of secondary school learners’ lived experience of engagement.

Chapter five discusses conclusions drawn from the knowledge gained in answering the four research questions and suggests recommendations for addressing a local problem of practice as well as providing implications for theory and future research. The study was built upon the following four research questions:

Research Questions

1. How do secondary school learners describe their perceptions of engagement at school and in the classroom?
2. How do classroom-level factors influence or affect learners’ experiences of engagement?
3. How do school-level factors influence or affect learners’ experiences of engagement?

4. How do family and community-level factors influence or affect learners' experiences of engagement?

The analytic categorizing of the lived experiences of secondary school learners in a large rural Missouri school district revealed two primary understandings of engagement, compliance and connection levels of engagement. Sub-theme categories emerged for both levels of engagement, with compliance as passivity, disinterest, boredom, and controlled in category one and with connection as the importance of the teacher, freedom and responsibility opportunities, guidance and support relationships, and purposeful and relevant experiences in category two, with these findings presented in narrative fashion in chapter four.

I sought to find connections within and between the analytic categories derived from the horizon lived experiences of engagement perceived by the research participants, a consistent practice within phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Understanding such connections in conjunction with applying the problem-posing process with the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016), spurred interpretative sense making by linking the research findings with the context, problem of practice, and big questions in chapter one; with what we already know about engagement from the literature and related conceptual framework in chapter two; with the methodology of a phenomenological qualitative approach in chapter three; with what was particularly interesting and insightful about the new information in chapter four; and with interpretive conclusions and implications for future practice and research in this chapter. Due to the interactive nature (Maxwell, 2005) of this qualitative study, there is some overlap and interrelatedness between my research findings linked to each chapter. Such overlap is a natural phenomenon of an interactive approach to qualitative research, noting, “a good design, one in

which the components work harmoniously together, promotes efficient and successful functioning” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 2).

Research Connections to Chapter One

In chapter one, I asserted the problem of practice of a decline in student engagement during the secondary school experience could be a life-altering experience. This contention was based on prior research findings which revealed a significant link between student engagement during the secondary school experience and the development of learner agency for self-determining success in school and subsequent life pathway readiness (Blumenfeld, Modell, Bartko, Secada, Fredricks, Friedel, & Parks, 2005; Conley & French, 2014; Diagostino & Olsen, 2015; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015; Marzano & Pickering, 2011; Zimmerman, 2012). The findings of this study confirm researchers long held conceptualization that engagement is a phenomenon of instructional and systemic importance, worthy of educational focus and research. The research findings of this study also confirm multiple prior findings of either declines in or a lack of engagement among students as they proceed into and throughout their secondary school experience (Busteed, 2013; Crotty, 2013; Fredricks et al., 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Newman, 1992; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kinderman, 2008; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2013). Accordingly, one researcher noted, “the most immediate and persisting issue for students and teachers is not low achievement, but student disengagement” (Newman, 1992, p. 2).

The preponderance of compliance levels of engagement perceived among research participants involved in this study in a large, rural Missouri secondary school context, established a modified existence of the problem of practice presented in chapter one. Research participants confirmed a lack of connection levels of engagement during their secondary school

experience in this district. Perceptual data of such a state of existence among secondary school learners was evidenced in chapter four as well as confirmed in the following focus group dialogue among high school sophomores. High school sophomores noted how a portion of their regular lived experience involved compliance levels of engagement. Elizabeth stated,

And it's like, every day. So you're just sitting there every day listening to them talk. And then you just get a worksheet. Then next day you test over it. And it's just like the same routine, so I think we, like, get tired of the same thing and we start going through the motions. And so we don't enjoy those classes for that reason.

Fellow sophomore, John, agreed, stating, "Yeah. It's like clockwork. You just go through the motions." Mary continued,

And if you try to tell, I've had this experience a lot, if you try to tell your parents, like, 'I'm so bored with waking up, going to school, going to bed. I want to do something more,' they're like, 'Well, you're just going to have to get used to it, because that's life. And you're going to get a job one day. You're going to get up, go to work, come home. And you're going to earn money and you're going to live.' And I've always, like, the idea of that, I'm just like, 'Ugh, I don't want to do this for the rest of my life.' But you realize that you have to. So you just kind of deal with it. You want something more in life than the nine to five. And, at this point, we've had the nine to five since kindergarten, at least that's what it feels like.

In stark contrast to such secondary school lived experiences of learners and their attending parental perspectives, engagement in school parallels the need to be engaged later in life, as the corporate world is beginning to understand engagement as a business strategy (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Therefore, it's not surprising a diversity of 21st century employers are looking at engagement models based on positive relationships, autonomous opportunities for employee voice and contributions impacting work decisions and direction, and purposeful, meaningful work, which all lead to a more productive and profitable business model with lower employee turnover (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

Although the findings of this study point to a systemic and observable instructional area of focus in regards to a lack of engagement throughout student learners' secondary school

educational experience, great hope exists among researchers to provide a turn-around from such an existence due to the highly malleable and actionable nature of this problem of practice (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). By awareness and acknowledgement of the brutal facts (Collins, 2001), concerning the problem of a lack of engagement among secondary school student learners, significant action could be taken at the classroom, school, family, and community levels to address the big question and concern of how to enhance student engagement at the secondary level of school in real time.

The research findings also inform another big question of chapter one, what is the importance of student voice for understanding what makes for an effective school experience. Student learners in this study repeatedly shared the need to express their voice, thoughts, and feelings as part of their learning experiences. However, researchers have noted the voices of learners are often hidden in teaching and curriculum-centered environments (Watkins, 2016). Furthermore, schools have traditionally ignored the voices of students and learners as valuable resources for school improvement (Cook-Sather, 2006). The findings of this study could inform educators who are looking to develop learner-centered environments in school by helping them evaluate their own beliefs and practices by engaging with the voices of learners who confirmed the problem of practice of a lack of engagement at the secondary level of school (Watkins, 2015 & 2016).

By exploring the perceptions of learners, district and school leaders could demonstrate how student engagement connects to a broader strategy of improvement by enacting district and school level improvement plans built on the research connections between student engagement and positive academic, emotional, and social school outcomes (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009; Yazzie-

Mintz & McCormick, 2012). According to Clarke (2015), learner-centered school improvement will occur when, “students’ personal interests, talents, and aspirations provide a starting point for designing their own pathways toward graduation, work, and college” (p. xiii). By gaining a richer understanding of the construct of student engagement from the perceptions of learners, enhancements towards self-determination, preparedness for college and career readiness, life-long learning, and stimulating “intellectual or practical passion to the next level of schooling and/or work” (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009), could be realized.

Another confirmation of the research findings for helping us understand the value of the problem of practice presented in chapter one is the high leverage nature of the phenomena of student engagement. Researchers have noted several encouraging outcomes associated with paying attention to student engagement across multiple socio-ecological environments. These include a positive impact on academic achievement. Watkins reports schools which maintained an “improving one’s competence orientation, in contrast to those with a proving one’s competence orientation,” demonstrated increased achievement with learning as measured on standardized assessments (Watkins, 2010, p. 4). In high schools, student engagement is linked to higher performance in reading, mathematics, and science (Dweck, 2006; Lee, 2014; Newman, 1992; Willms, 2003; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989), while emerging research data at the college level has associated final grades hinging largely on engagement (Whitmer, Fernandez, & Allen, 2012). In other words, student engagement enhances and compliments student achievement and learner performance.

Another encouraging outcome of a focus on student engagement is increasing a sense of belonging to the learning community for all learners (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Research participants spoke emphatically how the environmental conditions of classroom and

school contexts really made a difference in whether or not they chose to engage in academic tasks (Krasner, 1980). These findings confirm what we know about learning culture and climate within classrooms playing an essential part in assisting or damaging the chances that secondary school learners will engage (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Finn, 1989; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Similarly, the purposeful sample of secondary school participants in this study confirmed prior research that a lack of engaging environments at the secondary school level is well-documented even among those who exhibit success as measured by traditional student engagement indicators (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

Secondary school learners in this research study appeared to validate student engagement as essential for their short and long-term happiness, with this attitude reflected in the preponderance of their positive perceptions of connection stages of engagement. As student learners enthusiastically shared about their participation in both academic and non-academic pursuits (school activities), they described having good relations with school staff whom they perceived to care about their well-being. When teachers and coaches provided student learners freedom and responsibility opportunities, while also supplying enough skillful feedback and structured guidance for learners to feel challenged, on-track, and supported, research participants perceived they experienced more success in the present as well as purposeful and relevant learning preparation for future success.

The research participant findings appear congruent with and confirm the chapter one school district statements of an equal emphasis placed on both the individual and the community of learners having academic and affective opportunities. Such supportive opportunities provide learners an understanding of valuing themselves, their peers, and the world around them (Harris & Vidergor, 2015). Student learners' perceptions in this study also confirmed a chapter one

stated end goal of the research context school district, of learners becoming “happy, useful, and self-supporting citizens of our democracy” (Research School District, 2015). Peter seemed to articulate the growing fulfillment of this school district end goal when stating the following.

You can definitely tell in high school with all the opportunities you have to take different classes and everything, that school is getting serious. You're pretty much prepping yourself for college and prepping yourself for your career...by your senior year you get to look back at it and be proud, 'Yeah. I chose the right classes. I feel like I went beyond what other kids did, I took advantage of my opportunities, and I'm going to be more prepped for these courses and college.'

Peter's and other research participants' perceptions speak to the attractive scenario of the possibility of significantly increasing student engagement for all learners in school. As Peter exhibited, positively impacting learners by empowering their development of self-regulation, self-efficacy, ownership of learning, and student agency towards self-determination for life pathways (Eccles & Roeser, 2013; Martin, 2009; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reschly, et. al, 2009; Skinner, et. al, 2008; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Walker & Green, 2009; Watkins, 2009 & 2010), demonstrates the high leverage dimension of this problem of practice. Since student learners who have developed agency over their learning are more likely to understand, articulate and make clear progress towards, and celebrate mastery of learning goals and standards over time (Rickabaugh, 2012; Rickabaugh, 2015), listening to the confirming perceptions of research participants such as Peter, could assist adults and learners in partnering together to create learner-centered and learner-driven environments in classrooms and schools (McCombs, 2003; McCombs & Quiat, 2003; Reigeluth, Beatty, & Myers, 2017).

Research Connections to Chapter Two

In chapter two, we learned that engagement has enjoyed broad acceptance as a critical educational construct in the research community for over 40 years. Also discussed in chapter two, there is widespread agreement among educational researchers of the multi-dimensional

nature of engagement. Researchers have determined engagement involves anywhere from three to seven dimensions, normatively categorized as affective/psychological, behavioral/academic, and cognitive/intellectual domains and can include both academic and non-academic activities (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Parsons, Newland, & Parsons, 2014). Although challenges and scholarly disagreements exist within both academic and practitioner communities concerning a concise definition of engagement and the accurate measurement of the engagement construct, widespread support does exist that engagement is a critical factor in the equation of student success (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Martin, 2009; Rickabaugh, 2012; Wolfe & Poon, 2015).

However, we also learned in chapter two that educational researchers drew significant attention to emergent, more nuanced conceptualizations of engagement. The first nuanced conceptualization presented engagement as critically important, but not as an isolated educational construct. Instead, researchers contend it is when engagement works in tandem with such other educational constructs as motivation, self-efficacy, voice, and ownership of learning (Christenson et al., 2012; McCombs & Vakili, 2005; Reigeluth, Beatty, & Myers, 2017; Toshalis & Nakula, 2012) that post-secondary college, career, community, and life readiness is enabled (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). The second nuanced conceptualization portrayed engagement as the conceptual glue across multiple socio-ecological environments for student learners to experience sustained and more profound levels of learning in preparation for becoming self-determining, independent learners for post-secondary success (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

The preponderance of horizon experiences among secondary school research participants in this study confirm the findings of the literature review of engagement, including the multi-dimensional nature of the engagement construct as well as the more recent, nuanced conceptualizations of engagement. For example, when student learners in this study perceived their need for autonomous opportunities at the secondary level of learning for exploring inquiry-based areas of interest were met, such perceptions affirmed the prior research which demonstrated the interrelatedness of motivation, engagement, and voice as part of a continuum of learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Bray & McClaskey, 2015 & 2016; Christenson et al., 2012; Martin, 2009; McCombs, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Zimmerman, 2002). In other words, tapping student motivation via learners having voice and choice with learning content, process, or product, in collaboration with nurturing and guiding adults, research participants validate the activation of their inner energy in acts of engagement for learning. Conversely, a failure to tap the inward energies of research participants' through adult acknowledgment of their voice and choice with learning interests, content, process, or product, within the established curriculum, resulted in student learners' perception of an unlikelihood to commit themselves beyond a compliance level of engagement.

The research participants in this study appeared to confirm what Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) noted as a "web of causality" (pg. 1), that when individual educational constructs are interrelated and implemented synergistically (i.e. motivation, engagement, voice, ownership of learning, etc.), student learners expressed higher levels of engagement materialized in their lived experience. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012), highlighted the significance of such causality when naming the relationship web between motivation, engagement, and voice the "trifecta" (p. 33) of learner-centered learning, concluding "Without motivation there is no push to learn. Without

engagement there is no way to learn. Without voice, there is no authenticity in the learning” (p. 33). Deci and Ryan’s (2002) self-determination theory and Bandura’s (2001) theory of self-efficacy also support the importance of the interrelatedness of educational constructs for creating independent and agentic learners.

Additionally, student learners affirmed engagement as the conceptual glue for their learning across multiple socio-ecological environments by the multitude of their research responses perceiving the importance of intentional adult initiatives to establish guidance and support relationships with youth. As Lawson and Lawson (2013) contend, student engagement is more about connecting learners and learning through a complex series of relationships than a temporally measured checklist of school processes and activities. Repeatedly, secondary school student learners credited significant relationships with adults across multiple socio-ecological environments as a key for ascending to connection levels of engagement. Also, researchers argue when adults exhibit an intentional and skillful approach of providing just in time growth opportunities for learners, such actions develop the success ready beliefs, habits, and abilities of self-advocacy, self-efficacy, personal responsibility, perseverance, and ownership of learning in youth (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). As student learners experience opportunities for developing the synergistic beliefs, habits, and abilities of a learner, a pathway for becoming self-determining, autonomous, and success ready adults materializes (Conley & French, 2014; Rickabaugh, 2012).

Also, research participants continuously pointed out key adults in home, school, and community environments who provided the guidance and support relationships student learners so very much desired and needed to help understand the world around them and the world within them (Robinson, 2010). When secondary school learners expressed an engagement gap existed in an area of their learning experience, most generally at the classroom level of learning as

answered in research question number two, they articulated help in gluing the engagement gap shut by receiving significant assistance from a caring adult(s) or peers in another socio-ecological environment.

Eighth-grader, Erin, exemplified this when responding to one of the third individual interview questions: “After all you have heard and learned of about engagement during this study, how many adults at school know you really well, meaning your likes, dislikes, preferred learning style, interests, strengths, challenges, dreams, and hopes?” Erin responded only one of her teachers knew her well, her Drama and Speech class teacher. Erin went on to elaborate how this teacher knew public speaking, and acting were Erin’s passions, how she could tell when Erin was nervous and lacking confidence during class time or before performances and had timely words of advice or encouragement about how to relax in the moment. After Erin finished gushing about her elective teacher, I asked her, “What do you think might be the reason why more teachers don’t know you as well?” Erin responded,

I think it's because they're so much focused on their school work and they don't want to get to know the students; I feel like it's more, ‘Okay I need you to get this work done, I’m not going to bother you, get it done and were going to take a test over it next week.’ I feel like most teachers, they just, they want to stick to a teacher like stance and not help you become a better learner.

Erin’s response appears to confirm the chapter two emphasis that it is student identity-related drivers, meaning a learner’s “particular possible identity” (p. 475), or “who they are and who they want to become” (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 452), which are the primary determinants of future acts of student engagement or disengagement, not academic and activity driven frameworks for engagement (Oyersman et al, 2011). Erin went on to describe how student learners may feel when experiencing the relational isolation of not being known by the

adults in their classroom and school environments, and their subsequent failure to commit themselves in succeeding acts of engagement.

Erin's described her lived experience further when asked, "So how does that make you feel? I mean you shared in some of your core subject areas how those teachers don't really assist you or come around during class to interact with you." Erin responded, "Really frustrating." I continued, "How do you deal with your frustration?" Erin stated, "Oh, I usually talk with my girls. They understand me. My mom and grandma really help me get through my frustrations with school, I learn so much from them about how to handle life." I asked, "So your girls are your mom and grandma? I've never heard those relationships described that way before." Erin said, "Oh yeah!" So I continued probing, "You say you learn a lot from them about how to handle life, what level of engagement are you in with such learning with your 'girls'?" Erin answered, "Flow." I responded, "Flow, really? How so?" Erin explained her family level perception of a flow-like connection state of engagement with her following response.

Well, I mean it's something that you do. It's not like you're forced to do. You can do it, if you want to. You don't have to. I don't have to tell anybody about my feelings, but I do because I will blow up a like balloon if I don't and because I'm not very good at hiding my emotions. And if I keep holding them in, I'll get like really angry or frustrated. And that's not being a good person. So I have to let it out. And so I always let it out with my mom, when I'm ready, and then I'll call my grandma sometimes too. So that's why I feel like that's a flow, because I determine when I do something and then get help from people who are there for me.

I continued, "So are you saying there is a connection between not having to do something, not being required to do something or forced to do something and reaching higher levels of engagement?" Erin concluded,

I think...[long pause]. I think they are, that it's their job, their supposed to be there for the student whenever they need them, they're not supposed to keep them confined in chains of not knowing what to do or not helping you walk it out.

Thus, Erin, among other research participants in this study, confirmed the chapter two socio-ecological understanding of student engagement as an autonomous, systemic series of relationships and transactions between learners and teachers, the school environment, and other school, family, and community stakeholders (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Yazzie-Mintz, 2012). Secondary school learners in this study appeared to have closed existing engagement gaps at school due to teachers who couldn't provide a sense of belonging or self-identity, with available and supportive adult relationships in other socio-ecological environments.

These research findings authenticate engagement as the conceptual glue between learners, the learning environment, and subsequent learning, as revealed in the chapter two literature review. Student learners' perceptions in this study of the importance of addressing their social-emotional (affective, psychological) and cognitive needs (challenge, deep learning), confirms secondary school adolescents are not on "automatic pilot" (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 435) when they attend school; environmental conditions for feeling, acting, thinking, succeeding, and relating matter (Krasner, 1980; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The long-held educational assumption of equivocating seat time in pre-determined Carnegie units of instruction with learning (Littky, 2004), was not supported by the voices and perceptions of learners involved in this study.

Educational researchers and practitioners have advocated over decades for emerging school environments where learning is the constant and time is the variable, in contrast to traditional environments where time is the constant and learning is the variable (Flammer, 1971; Krasner, 1980; Livingston, 1994). An enduring educational assumption has been equating learning as the dissemination of generalized units of instruction in rigid time intervals and considering such practice an effective learning experience within schools for most student

learners. However, this assumption and its oft-accompanying expectation from teachers and the school system for students to commit with compliance levels of behavioral engagement, is largely considered ineffective practice by the educational research community as well as many practitioners (Bogen, 2001; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Keller & Reigeluth, 2004; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Meier, 1999; Sizer, 2013).

Nevertheless, the unfortunate reality exists, as so deftly demonstrated by research participants during this study, that the largest group of successful students in schools may be characterized as transactional, strategic learners; those who are prisoners of time (Education Commission of the States, 2005), exhibiting the customary student achievement markers of positive attendance, good grades, involvement in school activities, and recognition with schoolwide academic honors (i.e. Honor Roll, Honor Societies), and yet, still perceiving a yearning for something more, and all too often failing to reach connection levels of engagement in learning. Additionally, research participants observed their own and others' school experiences of learning for the sake of learning were rare, while apathetic learning experiences due to compulsory, compliance-based learning were regrettably too often the norm.

Although it's estimated that the majority of student learners in the United States spend almost 20,000 hours experiencing classroom learning experiences during their K-12 school careers, many times the curriculum, content, or skill presented isn't retained, and thus unavailable for use in other contexts (Dewey, 1938; Wilson & Conyers, 2018). Moreover, although student learners have logged such significant hours in classrooms, strong indications bear out that is no guarantee of the acquisition of creative thinking skills and an increased capacity to act as independent and resourceful learners (Meier, 2003; Tyner-Mullings, 2012). Likewise, evidence exists which shows high school graduates are not acquiring the necessary

learning strategies, habits, and dispositions for use in college or other post-secondary learning opportunities, despite guaranteed seat time at the secondary level of schooling (Goodlowe, 2017; Jackson & Kurlaender, 2013).

Dewey (1938) explains this educational dilemma with his theory of experience. Dewey posits that when present educational experiences and environments remain disconnected from real world conditions, the knowledge gained in such isolation will lack the continuity to “live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (1938, p. 17); and thus, such experiences are necessarily “miseducative” (1938, p. 19). Dewey (1938) also theorizes that a lack of interaction or harmonizing between the objects of learning and the internal, subjective condition of the learner, are a chief cause of such discontinuity. According to Dewey (1938), discontinuity results in future states of arrested development in learners who endure such educational experiences and environments in the present. Dewey states,

The principle of interaction makes it clear that failure of adaptation of material to needs and capacities of individuals may cause an experience to be non-educative quite as much as failure of an individual to adapt himself to the material. The principle of continuity in its educational application means, nevertheless, that the future has to be taken into account at every stage of the educational process. This idea is easily misunderstood and is badly distorted in traditional education. Its assumption is, that by acquiring certain skills and by learning certain subjects which would be needed later (perhaps in college or perhaps in adult life) pupils are as a matter of course made ready for the needs and circumstances of the future. Now ‘preparation’ is a treacherous idea. In a certain sense every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience. But it is a mistake to suppose that the mere acquisition of a certain amount of arithmetic, geography, history, etc., which is taught and studied because it may be useful at some time in the future, has this effect, and it is a mistake to suppose that acquisition of skills in reading and figuring will automatically constitute preparation for their right and effective use under conditions very unlike those in which they were acquired (1938, pp. 47-48).

The research participants in this study seemingly perceived in experience what Dewey (1938) identified as the segregation of subject areas, not only from each other but in educational

environments or scenarios which student learners observed were not congruent with future expected real-world learning environments. According to Dewey's (1938) theory of experience, when student learners acquire curriculum and learning content or skills through such silos of experience, the learning "...is hence so disconnected from the rest of experience that it is not available under the actual conditions of life" (p. 49). Therefore, the perception of student learners in this research study appears to confirm Dewey's theory of experience, that segregating curriculum into subject area silos in combination with isolating learning experiences into unlikely real world 50 minute periods of time, provides no assurance learning will be acquired, retained, or transferred to future learning contexts.

Research Connections to Chapter Three

In chapter three, I detailed my intentions to utilize the naturalistic inquiry process of phenomenology to gather and analyze qualitative perceptual data from the voices of student learners about their daily experiences in classrooms and schools as well as at home and in the community. The intent behind utilizing this methodology was to understand what level of engagement research participants perceived to attain to on the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C) in their educational and other socio-ecological environments from the voices of learners themselves. This constructivist approach of sense making places high value on the research participants constructing meaning from their own lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990), with Guba and Lincoln (1985) denoting the naturalistic inquiry processes of data collection and analysis as the "reconstruction of those constructions" (p. 332).

Therefore, to construct and reconstruct the meaning and essence of student engagement of secondary school learners in a large, rural Missouri school district, I exercised continuous interaction with over 660 pages of generated and transcribed data. According to Seidman

(2013), the transitory nature of lived experiences necessitates such looking and looking again to make sense of phenomena through the reconstruction of the lived experience. My confidence in this approach was confirmed through the research process as student learners expressed appreciation for fidelity and trustworthiness with their constructed meanings when member checking the transcriptions of their individual and focus group interviews.

The process of interpreting the findings began with the analytic practices of critical incident memo-writing and coding and classifying the data into themed categories and sub-theme categories, with each category directly relating to one or more of the research questions. Using Bloomberg and Volpe's (2016) interpretation outline tool, I reflected upon the findings more deeply in an attempt to uncover the meaning behind each finding. This was accomplished by questioning each of the findings using "problem-posing" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 236), which entails asking "Why?" and "Why not?" in multiple iterative cycles. Moustakas (1994) suggested such a continual focus on the phenomena under investigation would reveal the "essential nature" (p. 91) of the phenomena. As I explored and contemplated possible reasons to explain each finding, I concurred that the phenomenological process was profoundly meaningful for informing the research questions and understanding the essential nature of my local problem of practice of a decline in or lack of engagement among student learners during the secondary years of schooling.

I place great confidence in recommending the naturalistic approach of phenomenology for other researchers aspiring to answer research questions which require tapping the voices of those who have lived the experience under investigation. Such research studies require going beneath the surface of things and necessitate deeper mining for meaning (Van Manen, 1990). One piece of guidance I would advise to anyone aspiring to understand the perceptions of

research participants through qualitative research is to comprehend the potential time-consuming nature of phenomenology. Acquiring enough data to reach an adequate saturation point of the common perceptions of the lived experience requires a significant commitment of time and labor in handling the data, especially the greater the sample size.

Lastly, I highly recommend close consultation with your dissertation chair and committee as well as your research cohort to verify appropriate methodological approaches for keeping your study in proper alignment. For example, as I finalized my data analysis approach I utilized the voices of both of these collaborative groups to land on the use of In Vivo and Process coding methods for staying true to the participants lived experience and catching the action orientation of the interview narrative (Saldana, 2016). Qualitative coding aligned with my learner-centered conceptual framework, where seeking to understand the constructed meaning of engagement from the perception of student learners themselves was the priority research goal.

Discussion of Interpretive Conclusions and Implications for Practice

A series of excerpts from the chapter four findings will be reflected upon in this section as a means of communicating what was particularly interesting and insightful from the essence of secondary school student learners' lived experiences of engagement. The new contextual knowledge revealed in this study serves as the basis for my interpretive conclusions as well as implications for informing and solving a local problem of practice. It is noteworthy to state the profundity of the research participants' conceptual deliberations reinforced my perception of how we as adults and educators too often underestimate secondary school learners' deep thinking and academic abilities. My recommendations for local practice are grounded in the voices of learners.

Interpretive conclusion #1: It's a stage-fit environment engagement gap, not a school cliff decline in engagement.

My first interpretive conclusion from the research data is, the problem of practice of the decline in student engagement among secondary school learners as they proceed throughout their educational experience is more accurately an awareness of a stage-fit environment engagement gap than a straight decline in engagement. This conclusion is expressed eloquently by junior high research participant, Jason, however other student learners also inferred such a deduction in various statements during this study.

In a flow classroom, I feel that if you have choice and freedom to do what you want and show how you are learning in a way that you want to show it, that's what helps you achieve a flow classroom. The choice of you know, I want to do this to show how I'm learning and the teacher allows it, that's something important that kids need. They need the choice to do what they want, because as you grow older you need that. When you were a little kid you didn't care about how much freedom you had. You just kind of did what you did, because you weren't thinking that well. You weren't as developed as you are now, as you grow old and you mature. So when the teacher was showing you how to do stuff you know you would be like, okay, this is fine. But as you grow older you want to have more choice and control. So you don't want to be spoon fed information. You want to have the freedom to do what you want and how you want to do it, even if there are parameters.

Jason's and other research participants' similar perceptions during this study were of their growing need for autonomous and purposeful opportunities to enjoy significant learning experiences in the present to become responsible, self-determining learners and persons in the future. While elementary student learner findings in prior research studies report greater propensities of engagement than their secondary school peers (Busteed, 2013; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010), such findings may not account for differences within child and adolescent stages of development. Differences in developmental stages between elementary and secondary school learners appear to accentuate the inappropriateness of teaching and curriculum centered environments for the adolescent stage of development.

Researchers have noted the change in environments from the elementary level of learning to the secondary level accounting for the likely decline in measurable motivation and behavioral engagement measures (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). According to Eccles et al., (1993), building on cumulative stress theory and person-environment theory, it is the conditions within secondary school environments in combination with the developmental needs of emerging adolescents that account for negative trends in school-related measures, such as student engagement. Therefore, Eccles and Midgley (1989) advanced their stage-environment fit theory for explaining the importance of matching the environment to the person, otherwise negative personal consequences for student learners would be the natural result of any environmental mismatches.

Eccles et al., (1993) suggested a compelling way to use the person-environment fit perspective was to put it into a stage-environment fit developmental framework for student learners as they progressed throughout their years of schooling. Citing Hunt's (1975) person-environment fit, Eccles et al., (1993) argued for the significance of embracing a stage-environment fit perspective in the classroom and other school settings.

Maintaining a developmental perspective becomes very important in implementing person-environment matching because a teacher should not only take account of a student's contemporaneous needs by providing whatever structure he presently requires, but also view his present need for structure on a developmental continuum along which growth toward independence and less need for structure is the long-term objective, (p. 221).

Eccles et al., (1993) suggests that teachers should provide the optimal level of structure for student learners' current levels of maturity, while also supplying a sufficiently challenging environment to move student learners along a developmental path resulting in their acquisition of affective, cognitive, and social abilities for their future stations in life.

Acknowledging and acting upon such stage-environment fit understandings of adolescent development could provide local practitioners the necessary glue for closing the engagement gap of secondary school learners in this context. What Jason identified as a real and personal “need” for “choice,” conceptualizes precisely and succinctly his stage-environment fit as an adolescent and emerging young adult (Eccles, 2004) who requires an environment of “freedom.” As research participants time and again expressed their frustrations over compliance levels of engagement, I did not perceive the student learners were opposed to all experiences of compliance. Quite the contrary, I believe the student learners saw the value with some forms of compliance, but they also clearly communicated they don’t want to live there; they need room to roam and grow. Accordingly, getting the stage-environment fit matched correctly to the developmental needs of the person suggests a substantial likelihood of mitigating the adverse effects of the apparent school engagement cliff.

Therefore, I assert what Jason and the other research participants perceived as their longing for connection states of engagement, was the secondary school student learners’ desire for personalized learning environments which address their psychological and cognitive needs. In this scenario, student engagement becomes the conceptual glue for bonding their internal motivational processes of voice and choice to their developmental need of self-efficacy, agency over new learning experiences, an ability to think deeply and to understand and solve problems, and empowerment to become self-determining young adults (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Student learners in this study expressed an evident hunger for learning experiences and opportunities which allowed them to discover a greater sense of self and what direction they should take in their post-secondary school lives. The clear implication and recommendation to educational policymakers, school leaders, and practitioners in the local

context is acting on the knowledge generated by student learners in this study for preparing learner-centered environments of engagement based on the perceived needs of learners and the sound educational research base of the profession.

Interpretive conclusion #2: The predominance of teaching and curriculum centered environments.

After the introduction of the second and third interpretive conclusions, I will provide further interpretive support in the form of analytical characteristics of each of the conclusions, based on the research findings in this study.

In contrast to engaging stage-environment fits, the second interpretive conclusion of this dissertation in practice research study is the preponderance of teaching and curriculum centered environments in the local secondary school context. Findings from this dissertation in practice study support the interpretive conclusion that academic time on task or behavioral engagement is not enough for students to psychologically and cognitively invest in more in-depth levels of learning (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Research participants were clear that the prevalence of command and control compliance levels of engagement were neither acceptable, enjoyable, nor productive for their learning.

Without opportunities for student learners to reach all-encompassing psychological and cognitive states of experience in developmentally appropriate stage-environment fits, student learners will not achieve connection levels of engagement and subsequently miss out on autonomous and purposeful opportunities for driving their learning. One of the negative consequences ensuing from a lack of engagement experiences comes at the cost of student learners directly; the likelihood of them proceeding throughout their secondary school experience without acquiring the beliefs, dispositions, habits, and skills needed as preparation for

post-secondary success (Eccles, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). The analysis behind this deduction of educational affairs is the predominance of student learners' perceptions in the local context of teaching and curriculum centered environments.

Bad pedagogy, even when combined with a good curriculum, is unsustainable for student engagement. School is a guaranteed part of life, but learning is optional. When teaching and curriculum centered environments predominate over more humanistic approaches as learner-centered and learner-driven environments (Dewey, 1938; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), where little to no intentional time is invested in getting to know the learner and facilitating their acquisition of the beliefs, dispositions, habits, and skills of a learner, the system falls short of preparing success ready graduates. While beginning of the school year teacher inquiries into who learners are, what are their favored learning preferences, and other exploratory efforts are a good start in getting to know student learners, research participants perceived their teachers disregarded their personal funds of knowledge and such information was quickly put away and locked up, becoming afterthoughts during the remainder of the year. High school sophomore, John, shared this perception when stating, "It's not the teacher giving into how you want to learn, it's normally you have to adapt to how they teach."

The research participants perceived teacher's awareness of individual personal preferences was not taken seriously for use in personalizing the learning environment, but rather it was the student learners who were so often expected to comply with the system's default status of a teaching and curriculum centered environment. For instance, during the second focus group interview with the junior high participants, after reviewing the prior research of teachers' view of student engagement and the conclusion of many teachers that today's students don't want to

learn, I asked the eighth-graders what they thought of that analysis. They responded with this dialogue exchange.

Carol: I want to learn, but when it's not fun...

Jason: Depends on the class.

Carol: Yeah.

Ben: Yeah, because, like, whenever the teacher thinks we don't want to learn, the trick is that we probably do, it's just that, we don't want to learn like the way that you're teaching us.

Carol: Exactly!

Jason: It's the scenario that you're in, the environment that you're in, it's not the environment that you'd want to learn in, it's more just, 'I have to be here,' it's not, 'I want to be here.'

Ben: Yeah, because I know that it feels better if you do something, but you do it like through your own path and so, like going along the path which they want it to be done is what brings you down. But if they would allow us to sort of go outside of the box, where you're doing your own thinking and you're coming up with your own ideas, that is much better.

Carol: Yeah, I think that choice has to do a lot with engagement and even the kids that you think will never want to learn or will never be engaged, they are going to be engaged if you give them like a chance and get the right environment.

While research participants confirmed the majority of their teachers acted this way, meaning not inviting student learners to have more of a say in determining their learning pace, place, and path, the secondary school research participants responded they understood their teachers' dilemma. Student learners perceived teachers have too many kids throughout the day to get to know well, plus their teachers have a high expectation to cover the curriculum and prepare kids for summative, end of year high stakes tests. Although student learners understood, they communicated a yearning for more, for environments characterized by structured freedom, relational interaction with peers and adults, including the availability of adult guidance and

feedback, in learning experiences they deemed purposeful and relevant; but until now, no one had asked them what they wanted.

While teaching pre-determined curriculums and pursuing student proficiency or mastery of prescribed standards, we have unintentionally left the most critical aspect of learning out of the learning equation – the learner. This result isn't surprising when the secondary school learning experiences of many teaching professionals revolved around similar compliant sit and get pedagogies, which equated learning with content acquisition, over learning how to learn. Likewise, the predominant pedagogy reinforced in colleges of education teacher preparation programs is similar teaching and curriculum centered command and control approaches (Sims, 2003). As long as the teacher or curriculum drives the learning, there is no room for the learner to emerge as the driver of his or her learning.

Such lack of autonomous opportunities for developing the beliefs, dispositions, habits, and skills of a learner has unintentionally created over-dependence on the teacher for student learning. It appears the harsh reality exists that many students don't know how to be a learner. They have played the game of school for so long and have learned the measurement of success is receiving good grades and acquiring credits towards their high school diploma. Although research participants expressed a desire for something more, several of the student learners didn't have anything to offer as a replacement pedagogy. How could they? Without having acquired the traits of a learner and being presented opportunities to drive their learning, we have unintentionally created a motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, ownership of learning, student agency, and self-determination gap among our secondary school student learners.

We shouldn't be surprised adolescent student learners don't know how to self-direct and self-manage when we haven't afforded them opportunities to practice such dispositions. For

those who have acquired the dispositions of a learner by having the engagement gap filled by instructive adults in other socio-ecological contexts, such as a parents, coaches, youth pastors, extended family members, or work supervisors, they appear to have ideas for creating alternative pathways to personally meaningful engagement and subsequent more in-depth learning experiences. For example, junior high student learner, Jason, stated,

Something I would say, plain and simple is don't make the class boring. Don't make it to where kids are just sitting down doing work, learning things, like learning it, not really learning it, just kind of memorizing it and then regurgitating it back out on a test. Don't make it to where that's the case in your classroom. You want it to where kids want to be in an environment, where they want to learn, and they want to be in that classroom instead of just sitting there and doing nothing and just trying to get a good grade in that classroom.

Such perceptions from student learners should serve notice as a warning light on a car dashboard instrument panel. Unfortunately, the voices of learners are too often hidden and not considered as a valuable resource for school improvement. Instead, research participants shared a collective perception that the status quo of a lack of engagement is just to be endured and gotten over with as a rite of passage of secondary school student learners. Student learners cited regular classroom experiences of subject area isolation from other learning subjects as well as a lack of perceived purpose or relevance for the future use of the intended curriculum as major experiences to be endured. Student learners stated most of their teachers didn't communicate any meaning for their learning beyond preparing for a test or receiving of a grade. As high school junior, Peter, stated, "We never really learned how to apply mathematics to real life situations..."

High school junior, Marcia, and eighth grader, Jason's following quotes were cited earlier in this dissertation, but their compelling analysis deserves repeating here as summary perceptions of bad pedagogy accounting for lack of engagement at the secondary level of learning. First,

Marcia shared, “Yeah, there are so many different ways to learn something, but our teachers only know one way, at the most two ways.” Secondly, Jason expressed,

You don’t want to be sat down then chained to a curriculum, ‘Do this and this and this,’ and then go on your merry way. No. You want to engage in what you want to do. You want to, you know paint something that you want to paint or you want to make a project that you want to do. It is how you want to learn instead of how the system wants you to learn. Why should the system default to what they want, why restrict me?

Black et al., (2004) agreed, asserting the importance of getting the art and science of teaching and learning right to inspire the learner to higher levels of learning and achievement.

Bad curriculum well taught, is invariably a better experience than a good curriculum badly taught. In other words, pedagogy trumps curriculum. Or more precisely, pedagogy is curriculum, because what matters is how things are taught, rather than what is taught (p. 14).

The secondary school student learners in this study seemed to substantiate such an assertion in the meaning-making construction process of their lived experiences of engagement; the way they learn something is as important as what they are learning.

It has been noted by researchers that possibly the most significant resource to tap for higher states of engagement in learning is the learner’s natural and innate desire to learn (Niemic & Ryan, 2012). However, based on learner perceptions in this study, that desire to learn often goes untapped. What explains this lack of going beneath the surface of things and inquiring of the learner how adults could improve facilitating student learners moving into the driver seat of their learning? I would like to emphasize it is most often not the fault of teachers directly; they are generally only complicit by way of their participation in an outdated and under-informed approach to educating our youth at the secondary level of learning. It bears repeating, the lack of engagement in learning is a systemic problem of practice and an area of instructional focus worthy of our attention.

In my observations and discussions with educators in the local context, in the majority of the cases, it isn't a lack of will, but a lack of skill, which is responsible for the dominance of teaching and curriculum centered environments. This assertion is why my interpretive conclusion doesn't state it is teacher centered environments, but instead teaching and curriculum centered environments which account for the lack of engagement among secondary school learners. The possibility of developing the pedagogical skill for creating learner-centered environments exists through professional development, sustained effort, guidance and feedback, and collective efficacy over time. Also, with social science researchers' contributions to the field from the university or academy level in providing deeper understandings of educational problems through new knowledge and theory development, "the practice gap" (Christenson et al., 2012, p. 815), between what is known and what is applied for improving educational opportunities for our youth could be closed.

Culture of compliance. My interpretive analysis deducts that our intentional focus on establishing teaching and curriculum centered environments has unintentionally created a culture of compliance among student learners in this context. Elizabeth, a high school sophomore, exemplified this deduction, when stating, "I just feel like I didn't care, as long as I got the work done, then I was fine." Similar research participant responses abounded, such as going through the motions, being on auto-pilot, trying to get the grade or acquire the credits so they can just move on, all the while struggling to ascend to deeper levels of learning. Similarly, student learners expressed feeling besieged about retaining basic subject matter content, instead of developing their identity as a learner and sense of self for a hopeful future. When we have reduced learning to measurements of proficiency on standardized assessments, we rob student learners of the education they deserve and their possession of the beliefs, habits, skills, and

dispositions of a learner they will need to be a success ready graduate (Kohn, 1999; Rickabaugh, 2012).

Additionally, a singular focus on individual educational constructs, such as engagement in the classroom, apart from working in tandem with other critical educational constructs as motivation, self-efficacy, and ownership of learning, can create a culture of compliance where student learners believe they cannot learn without over-dependence on a teacher (Couros, 2015; Rickabaugh, 2012; Wilms, 2003). According to researchers, without sustained learner agency over time, accompanied, complemented, and facilitated by supportive relationships and engaging activities across academic, extra-curricular, and out of school ecologies, student learners' personal development for post-secondary success can be hindered (Appleton et al., 2008; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Trowler, 2010). Attention to such synergistic variables as the educational constructs of motivation, engagement, voice, self-efficacy, ownership of learning, and learner agency (as graphically depicted in Figure 6), enable practitioners to prepare learner-centered approaches to educating our youth [conceptual framework] (APA, 1997; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; McCombs, 2003; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Reigeluth, Beatty, & Myers, 2017; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

Failure to prepare success ready graduates. The dominance of bad pedagogies, restricting curriculums, and subsequent classroom cultures of compliance, confirm an interpretive conclusion supported within the research data; namely, systemic levels of failure to prepare success ready graduates. This interpretive conclusion was readily evident even among upperclassmen within the local context, demonstrating behavioral engagement is not enough to develop success ready graduates. The following juniors' focus group interaction strikingly

demonstrates the revelation of an existing engagement gap in preparing self-efficacious and self-determining learners.

Mr. Bronn: It sounds like having freedom and choice with your learning is of considerable importance to you. You also appear to be struggling with the purpose and relevance of many of your classroom experiences. So, if you could change the system and redesign it to be more engaging, more of you feeling empowered or invested in your learning, you're getting more out of it, knowing you would see more purpose in it, that's what I want to hear about. It's like, yeah, the state has said these are required credits, you have to take them, therefore the district has to offer them, and you have to take them, whether you see the purposes in them or not, which you all says frustrates you; having to take classes you see no purpose in. So this comes up to how could you redesign school in a way, at a pace, place, and path of your choosing, where you could meet your requirements, but in a flexible way. Would you feel better about that if you had more freedom and autonomy to learn what you wanted to learn and how you wanted to learn it? Talk to me about it, and how would you do it if you could?

Greg: It sounds great and all, but if the teachers...like next year if we walked into all our classes and the teachers said here's what you have to know by the end of the year and you're going to do whatever you want to do to figure out how to learn that. I know, probably, I... For sure, Peter, too [group laughter ensues]... We don't even know that until the end of the year and we wouldn't do anything for the first six months of school and yeah probably longer than that. How many months of school 'til we're done? We wouldn't do anything for the first eight months of school and then we would not know how to do anything.

Mr. Bronn: Yeah. So talk about it, you know. What's the balance? What would you like? You have stated you have to take American Government when you already know a lot of the content, saying you don't get the point of having the same content over and over again, so you and Peter sit with 101% and sit in the back of the class not really engaged and you just do the work to get the grade. You all [looking around at the focus group] have said the same thing about other classes, 'What's the point? What's the purpose for this class?'

Greg: I don't know. I mean it sounds great to like learn how you want to learn it and all this and all that, but like if you tell me to learn something how I want to learn it, I don't know how I want to learn it. Whether I want to learn it or not, I need to, but I don't know how to do that. And so that's, I mean that's obviously why we have teachers. I don't know how to do that.

A pre-study assumption existed that this purposeful sample of 14 secondary school research participants who exhibited high levels of behavioral and academic engagement, who possessed numerous classroom and school level markers of academic achievement, and who

participated and experienced success in multiple non-academic school activities, would necessarily equate to their preparedness as success ready graduates. However, numerous research participant perceptions such as Greg's aforementioned lack of experience in driving his own learning, confirmed chapter two literature review understandings of a lack of adequate developmentally appropriate engagement experiences having a significant negative impact on the growth of learners' self-efficacy, ownership of learning, and agency for self-determining success in school and subsequent life pathway readiness (Dagrosa Harris, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Rickabaugh, 2012 & 2016). Research participants' perceptions of angst over their lack of development in the areas of student agency, self-efficacy, and ownership of their learning was truly surprising. This perception of student learners participating in this study served as a conceptual signpost of the troublesome nature of granting a hierarchical status to teaching and curriculum centered environments, with the accompanying result of the gross inadequacy of student engagement experiences at the secondary level of learning.

Summary of interpretive conclusion #2. Such an inadequacy of engagement experiences is a real concern for college and career readiness where higher order thinking is required, motivation must manifest itself in self-guided actions of engagement, and students must be both emotionally and cognitively engaged to succeed (Conley, 2007, 2010). Indeed, academic intrinsic motivation and subsequent engagement, or "self-motivation for and enjoyment of academic learning and tasks," is more strongly correlated with college GPA than academic extrinsic motivation, or "learning and involvement in academic tasks for instrumental reasons" (French, 2014; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Richardson et al., 2012). According to Toshalis and Nakkula (2012), conceived in this way, student engagement is a "decisive turning point in the web of causality that links individual students' experiences to their behaviors in

school and beyond” (p. 18). Researchers contend it is within and during the complex interactions between positive internal (psychological) and external (social) involvements where learners decide to engage and experience resulting positive personal and school outcomes (Appleton et al., 2008; Chuang, Shen, & Judge, 2016; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Conversely, if learners’ various ecological experiences are primarily negative due to a systemic neglect of their engagement needs, student learners may likely choose to disengage due to such adverse, alienating, and disaffecting conditions (De Laet et al., 2016; Green et al., 2012; Martin, 2009; Virtanen, Kiuru, Lerkkanen, Poikkeus, & Kuorelahti, 2016). If school leaders and practitioners recognize the momentous consequences of “virtuous or vicious cycles” (Green et al., 2012), which demonstrate the positive and negative reinforcing propensities of engagement phases, great life benefits could be provided to secondary school learners through their participation in engaging environments, while simultaneously preventing many life-altering circumstances which accompany a lack of engagement in school.

Interpretive conclusion #3: The need for learner-centered environments.

The opening sentence of this dissertation in practice is, “Students need a voice, not a survey.” As I tapped the voices of learners for understanding their lived experiences of engagement, I listened to the research participants with the ultimate intention of acquiring a better understanding of the phenomenon for remedying a local problem of practice. The learner-centered conceptual framework undergirding this study drove the selection and use of this methodological approach. By viewing the problem of practice through a learner-centered lens, I was able to bring the voices of learners out of hiding (Watkins, 2016) and into the spotlight for a better understanding of what engages secondary learners across their various socio-ecological environments.

The secondary school research participants involved in this study argued a more learner-centered approach in school is required to activate their energies towards meaningful learning experiences. Student learners identified four key sub-themes which enabled the release of such power: The importance of the teacher for providing the environmental conditions necessary for engagement, opportunities to exercise freedom and responsibility in the learning process, opportunities for guidance and support from caring adults, and opportunities for purposeful and relevant learning experiences. Secondary school learners were eager to spotlight several horizon experiences of connections levels of engagement and subsequent positive outcomes which accompanied such states of experience

The importance of the teacher for providing the environmental conditions necessary for engagement. When high school junior, Peter, stated the following learning preference for his classroom environments, he was connecting his internal energy of personal motivation to an action orientating engagement pathway for experiencing new learning.

I prefer working in groups and I like the idea of all of us doing class activities altogether, rather than just like small busy work or something, or you just get to work and just do it by yourself. I feel like that really got students connected by sharing their thinking.

While Peter's response expresses his acknowledgment and appreciation for his teacher facilitating positive social and relational interactions for engagement, it does move one to wonder about the unintended effects of individualized and differentiated approaches of instruction and whether those approaches isolate students from the most engaging part of learning?

In my thinking, I believe all learning is personal (McCombs, 2012; McCombs & Vakili, 2003; Rickabaugh, 2013). When we apply standardized strategies to student learners who are anything but standard, knowing they are all highly diverse, we set kids up to fit into our pre-

determined boxes of instruction (Black et al., 2004; Littky, 2004). Consequently, we may unintentionally marginalize those who don't match the preferred standardized strategy of the day, something which should be unacceptable in schools, no matter how high a strategy's effect size ranks on a meta-analysis study (Hattie, 2008).

In order to achieve higher levels of learning for each student, I believe we must begin with the learner. While individualized and differentiated approaches to teaching and learning may provide a variety of learning experiences for a child, the locus of control for who creates the learning experiences, and consequently, who drives the learning, is still in the hands of the teacher. Conversely, personalized learning approaches bring the person, the learner into the forefront of the learning experience, by helping them understand how they learn best to become the driver of their learning (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; McCombs, 2003 & 2012; Rickabaugh, 2012).

Accordingly, the research participants in this study conceptually perceived it is the responsibility of those in control of the environment to shape the conditions for connection levels of engagement. For example, during the third and final individual interviews with the secondary school student learners, I asked the participants to respond to the following concluding discussion question. "After all you have learned about student engagement through your participation in this study, how much of the responsibility for engagement lies with you the learner and how much with the adults in schools?" The ensuing responses from a few of the research participants expressed the essence of what the student learner cohort communicated as a whole. High school sophomore, John, shared,

I see it-- most people would see it as 50-50, but I see it a little bit more on the teacher's side, because I think that they should be trying to do a little bit more, because in high school I know a lot of kids, they're like, 'Ahh, school,' and like they don't want to be here. So, we like--some of those kids really need teachers to help them be engaged

toward learning, so they can take over the rest and then they can start being engaged in classes.

John's perception resonated with the other research participants who communicated a need for teaching professionals to initiate the process of learning, but then to let the student learners "take over the rest." Fellow sophomore, Elizabeth, continued this line of thinking with her response.

I think like more is on the teachers, because like that's kind of their job, but I think some of it's on us too, because like it's our responsibility if we have a question, to go up and ask the teacher, or if we don't understand to ask. So I think it's like more on them but like we also have responsibility.

I asked the same question in the final focus group interview with the junior high student learner cohort group, with Jason and Carol providing the last analogy on how they perceive the mutual responsibility of adults and student learners for engagement in learning.

Jason: It's like you have a figure, like an adult figure, holding you by like, a loose rope so you could explore around, but they don't completely just let you go, 'Oh yeah, here you go, bye.'

Carol: You have a little circle like roped around them [indistinct chatter and laughter].

Jason: Yeah, the person's like in the middle of the circle and they're holding you by this loose rope and they're not letting you go, but at the same time they're not totally restricting you.

Carol: And like each year, they give a little more rope to you.

Establishing learner-centered environments where student learners experience freedom and responsibility, guidance and support, and purposefully relevant learning opportunities as a pathway to becoming self-determining, independent adults, is the second of two analytic characteristics of interpretive conclusion number three.

Freedom and responsibility, guidance and support, and purposefully relevant learning opportunities. One of the primary engagement drivers revealed by secondary school

learners in this context was the choice to work collaboratively at school. This was especially true as it relates to the secondary school research findings from this study of providing learners autonomous opportunities to choose learning approaches which personally fit each learner, and subsequently driving up engagement. As evidenced by Peter and several other of the research participants, when student learners work together on projects or other learning activities they become part of a community committed to learning, with a shared purpose and a sense of mutual responsibility for each other (Diaz, Brown, & Salmons, 2010). Collaborating with others can enhance critical thinking, encourage adaptability, promote social and emotional learning, help students accept and appreciate differences in others, and reduce student apathy, absenteeism, and dropout (Diaz, Brown, & Salmons, 2010).

One of the major tenets of qualitative research I have come to appreciate the most is the emphasis on recognizing the primacy of the particular over the dominance of the general. We all construct and create meaning out of our learning experiences; therefore, there is no purely right or wrong way of learning, just personalized learning. This way of thinking appears to align with the research findings of both Appleton et al's., (2008) self- processes continuum of engagement (Figure 2) and Lawson and Lawson's (2013) transactional framework of engagement (Figure 1). Ascribing to either paradigm, as well as remaining open to new and emerging conceptual models of engagement, empowers educational leaders to personalize pathways of engagement for the diversity of learners served in today's educational environment.

Whereas the self-processes model proceeds along the path of context \longrightarrow self \longrightarrow action \longrightarrow outcomes, accounting for the present learning environment providing the opportunities adolescents need to satisfy their basic psychological needs (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Martin, 2009 & 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012); the transactional model of

engagement recognizes what might be the order of antecedents for engagement for one person or group, might not be sufficient for another person or group. Instead, since various social ecologies such as family, community, school, and out of school youth community groups influence learners, a socio-ecological synergy (condition) emerges for student learners to experience engagement as a dynamic, personalized, and purpose-driven transactional process (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Iwasaki, 2015; Kiefer & Wang, 2016; Lawson, Alameda-Lawson, & Richards, 2016; McFarland, Moody, Diehl, Smith, Thomas, 2014).

Both models embrace supportive contextual or socio-ecological experiences, where the self-embodies the adolescent student learner's personalized construction of motivational self-system processes, arranged around such psychological needs as autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). These self-system processes, in turn, are the inward building materials used by adolescents to constructively engage in actions which produce such positive outcomes as academic achievement and student success (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Zucconi, 2015), and the avoidance of such at-risk behaviors as boredom, disaffection, poor school attendance, behavior problems, and drop-out (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

The research findings of this study suggest if learners are sufficiently engaged and encouraged relationally by teachers and other vital adults across various social-ecologies, their engaging behaviors can gain momentum and increase over time, resulting in even greater learner agency for self-determining success in school and life pathway readiness (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Klem & Connell, 2004; Park et al., 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Zimmer-Gemback, Chipuer, Hanisch, Creed, & McGregor, 2006; Zyngier, 2008).

Summary of interpretive conclusion #3. The voices of student learners in this study call out for a more person-centered approach to classroom and school experiences to meet

secondary school students need for higher levels of engagement on the Continuum of Engagement (Appendix C). The research findings of this study do not dismiss the importance of good curriculum, content, learning standards, and the best of research-informed instructional practices, however they do assert these are insufficient without also focusing equally on the stage-environment fit, learner-centered, and learner-driven development needs of the secondary school learner (McCombs, 2003 & 2004; McCombs & Quait, 2002; McCombs & Whisler, 2003; Meece, 2003; Watkins, 2016; Weinberger & McCombs, 2003). In other words, if we want sustained and durable learning, we must go through the learner.

According to McCombs (2003), a learner-centered conceptual framework necessitates a dual focus on individual learners - their backgrounds, experiences, interests, talents, expectancies, heredity, and needs; and on learning – the best of what we know about learning, how it occurs, and how it informs instructional practices which are conducive to increasing motivation, engagement, learning, and achievement for all learners (see Figure 4). A learner-centered paradigm supports the notion that schools are living ecosystems, environments which exist for student success and the symbiotic purpose of learning for both the student and those who facilitate and sustain the learning process (teachers, administrators, parents, and community members) (McCombs, 2003; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Rickabaugh, 2012 & 2013). Essentially, a learner-centered framework conceptualizes schools as communities committed to learners and learning.

Therefore, after spending significant amounts of time with the research participants both individually and in focus groups, followed up with multiple hearings, looks, and handlings of their shared perceptions of engagement, I am confident in sharing the collective essence of their experience for understanding and improving upon a local problem of practice. After my

experience of listening to 14 secondary school research participants through a series of qualitative interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts, I believe student learners want to be known, valued, and heard from as a voice for creating authentic student engagement opportunities in school. Accordingly, my recommendation for local practice is to tap the voices of learners for their personalized preferences of engagement as the self-system process necessary to produce and sustain self-efficacy, ownership of learning, and learner agency for becoming self-determining individuals.

Conclusion

The final section of this dissertation in practice is for sharing future recommendations for practice, suggestions for future research, and my final reflections. Concluding remarks and last words are often impactful; however, the voices of learners given expression throughout this study are the most compelling words for our attention. What I offer in conclusion are my brief recommendations, suggestions, and reflections.

Recommendations for future practice. My highest recommendation is for local practitioners to work together to empower the secondary school student learners of our district to begin constructing and taking responsibility for their learning. Such an accomplishment awaits those who develop a shared vision for creating a learner-centered and learner-driven culture; setting high expectations for educators to move towards developing such environments, in conjunction with experiencing the necessary professional training to facilitate such stage-environment fit, developmentally appropriate environments, where learning is viewed more as a process, than an event (Couros, 2015; Rickabaugh, 2012); and finally, providing teachers the openness and autonomy needed to affect their own collective efficacy for the success of the student learners they serve.

The overarching implication and recommendation for practice gained from the newly generated knowledge of this context's student learners, is understanding the conditions which optimize learners' affective, behavioral, cognitive, and socio-ecological engagement. For emphasis sake, I restate here that student learners involved in this study did not appear opposed to all experiences of compliance. Compliance is not a bad thing; it is a part of life. For example, school employees in my district read, review, and sign-off on a school district compliance handbook every school year. While some compliance is helpful and understandable for common expectations, order, and operations, we can't expect student learners to live in the land of compliance. We were made for freedom (Jefferson, 1776). Student learners intuitively yearn for the freedom to learn (Dewey, 1938, Rogers & Freiberg, 1982), even when suppressed by year after year of teaching and curriculum driven environments.

In response to the secondary school research participants involved in this study, who perceived a predominance of compliance levels of engagement, characterized by passive, disinterested, bored, and controlled states of experience due to the preponderance of teaching and curriculum centered environments in the research context, I recommend school, district, and community leaders muster the courage and determination to develop a shared vision for establishing learner-centered and learner-driven environments. By addressing the identified local problem of practice of a lack of engagement among secondary school student learners, current learners' perceptions of a lack of engagement could be turned around by meeting the stage-environment fit needs of the district's adolescent and emerging adult student learners. My assertion, based on the perceptions and shared voices of student learners involved in this study, is that as long as we lead with a teaching and curriculum driven and centered approach to learning, many student learners will continue to see classroom level experiences as work they are doing

for the teacher, rather than learning they are doing for themselves. Lacking the opportunities to engage with their whole person, affectively, behaviorally, collaboratively, and cognitively, student learners will live in the land of compliance and miss out on developing the self-efficacy, ownership of learning, and learner agency needed for becoming self-determining, success ready graduates.

Ted Sizer (1932-2009), the founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools, professor and chair of the education department at Brown University and Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and author of several books, examined the state of America's secondary schools in his book *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Sizer, 2004). Sizer's book was a study co-sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the Commission on Educational Issues of the National Association of Independent Schools. Sizer (2004a) asserted that to exact significant changes in educational practice, decade's old educational assumptions and succeeding instructional approaches must be challenged and replaced with learner-centered principles to accomplish sustainable change. Elsewhere, another of Sizer's primary conclusions (2004b) was, to teach each student well, we have to know each student well and that schools must fit every learner, not learners required to fit the school.

Sizer's assertions have contributed to my own contention and recommendation: Based upon the findings in this dissertation in practice study, that due to a focus in the local context of establishing and maintaining a teaching and curriculum centered framework, we are falling short of preparing success ready graduates who are maturing into self-determining, life-long learning adults; and therefore, leaving them without their best hope for a bright future. Instead of being satisfied with mere behavioral engagement, where student learners just play the game of school

in passive compliance, with satisfaction in measuring success as passing classes, making the honor roll, and accruing credits, local educational practitioners should commit themselves to guaranteeing graduates are success ready individuals. As long as we have student learners who do not share a sense of belonging at school, who do not see purpose and relevance in their learning experiences, who do not believe that academic success will have a strong bearing on their future, who lack the rigor and vigor of thinking critically and the challenge to expand their ways of thinking through the guidance and support of adult relationships, and who lack a sense of hope for a positive life direction, then we are failing to provide connections levels of engagement.

Suggestions for future research. Grounded in the interpretive conclusions of this research study, I offer the following suggestions for future inquiry into the local problem of practice. First, due to the small, purposeful sample of secondary school learners in this dissertation in practice study, including other groups of student learners as research participants from the local context could enhance our understanding for solving the problem of practice of a lack of engagement at the secondary level of school.

Also, since the research participants in this study so strongly emphasized the importance of teachers, coaches, and other adults at school for reaching connections levels of engagement, a follow-up study could investigate teachers' perceptions of engagement at the secondary level of learning. Such a study could provide an additional perspective to compare and contrast with the student learners' lived experience of engagement; and thus, furthering our understanding for improving educational practice locally to meet the engagement needs of secondary school learners by gaining the perceptions of those leading learning experiences at the classroom and school levels,. Such knowledge could also serve candidates in teacher education programs by

enlightening and enhancing their preparation as learner-centered educators.

Another suggestion for future research is to build on the interpretive analysis of a stage-environment fit diagnosis accounting for the problem of practice of a lack of engagement among secondary school student learners in this district. Therefore, I would recommend the following questions for future research during the transition periods between intermediate and middle or junior high school, and middle/junior high and high school. Guiding research questions for such studies could include: (1) What are the developmental needs of each transitioning group of student learners in the local context? (2) What kind of educational environments would be developmentally appropriate regarding meeting each transitions needs as well as encouraging further student learner development? (3) What are the most common changes experienced by adolescents as they move into middle school, junior high, and high school? (4) Are the learning environments at these stages compatible with the affective, cognitive, and social changes early adolescents and emerging adults are experiencing? (Eccles et al., 1993).

Lastly, I suggest exploring further the practices and conditions which foster a culture of compliance among secondary school student learners. One pedagogical practice which surfaced time and again in this research study was the impact of current grading practices. Research participants appeared to interpret their grades as a reward for performing behavioral acts of engagement, and even the use of grades as a control mechanism to master the pre-determined curriculum, instead of being used as inspiration, encouragement, and growth giving feedback for current and future learning. Future research could examine the purpose and appropriateness of various grading practices.

Final reflections. It became clear to me throughout this study that student learners want to be engaged. Research participants grew excited throughout this study when they

reconstructed happy, purposeful, relevant, and personally important learning experiences across their various socio-ecological environments. Student learners were equally exuberant over what they perceived as present successful learning experiences as well as opportunities they deemed as highly significant in preparing them for their hopeful futures. The research participants provided momentous insights into the lived experiences of today's secondary school learners in a large, rural Missouri school district.

While such perceptions are particular or unique to this context, I don't believe they are exceptional in the general sphere of secondary school learners' experiences of engagement in the United States of America. After serving as a public educator in three different states, one in the Midwest, one in the deep south, and one in the mid-south, similar patterns have been observable with student learners 'engagement in schools. During the last nine years of service as a professional public school educator in the research context school district of Missouri, I have appreciated the camaraderie and inquiry stance of the teachers at our school where we purpose to create student success. Those on the front lines of student success at our school, the teachers, have observed and perceived similar patterns of a lack of engagement in learning among our student learners. The teachers at my school were a big part of the inspiration and encouragement behind my taking the journey of becoming a practitioner-scholar to properly understand and diagnose a problem of practice in the school district where we serve together. I'm also obliged to our superintendent of schools for his challenge and encouragement to do the good and hard work of research to correctly understand the issues at hand for blazing a possible trail of school improvement.

One of the primary purposes of education should be to contribute to the discovery of learners' passions, talents, and interests; however, I believe education is instead partly

responsible for hindering learners from this purposeful process (Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Rickabaugh, 2015; Robinson, 2010). By structuring school around top-down driven standardization, and subsequent teaching and curriculum centered instructional experiences, little to no time is afforded for developing relationships of significance between learners and educators, leading to a collaborative effort of mining for learners' passions, interests, and talents (Hattie, 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004; Martin, 2009; Quin, 2016). Understanding such reasons for the lack of engagement in classrooms and at school help illuminate (Bordage, 2009) the nature of the problem of practice and potentially facilitates the types of educational practices needed to engage learners cognitively, psychologically, and socio-ecologically, so learners develop agency for new learning, positive developmental outcomes, and self-determining life pathways.

As I conclude this dissertation in practice study, I find myself in possession of new understandings for practice based on the perceptions of student learners involved in this study. Their perceptions confirm the robust consensus of social science researchers of the finding and belief that children and adolescents are innately curious and hungry learners, possessing a natural desire to construct meaning out of their learning environments and experiences (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, & 2002; Kim, 2014; Kohn, 1993 & 1999; McCombs, 2012; Niemiec and Ryan, 2012; Robinson & Aronica, 2015; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). I hope this study encourages others to regard the voices of learners as essential and trustworthy for conducting effective educational research. By listening to today's students, we can discover the nuances which come with understanding each new generation of learners to personally engage them in enduring learning experiences.

I contend gaining the rich details of the lived experience of a specific phenomenon requires listening to the voices of those who have lived the experience. I believe the secondary school research participants in this study and myself as the researcher constructed and reconstructed a greater understanding of the phenomenon of student engagement through utilization of the phenomenological method of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I hope others will see the reliability of using qualitative methods when seeking to understand, confront, and help remedy such life-altering concerns as a lack of engagement for student learners during their secondary school experience.

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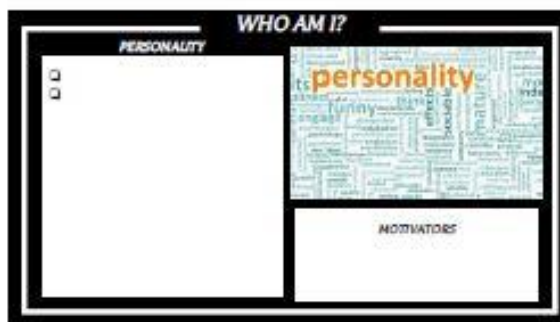
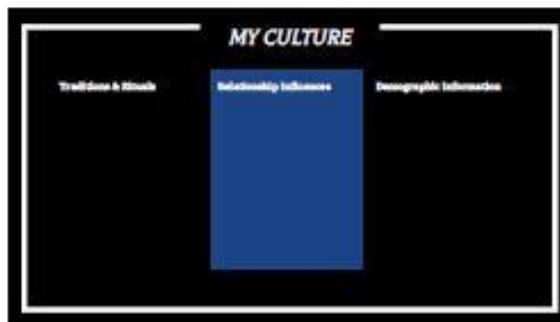
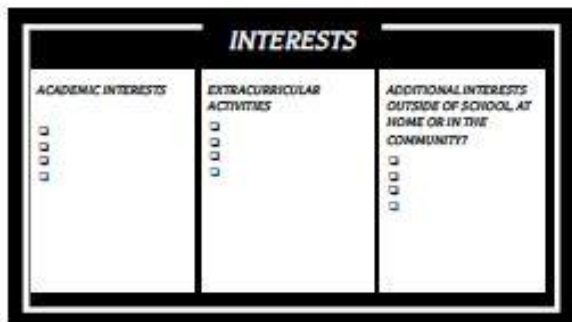
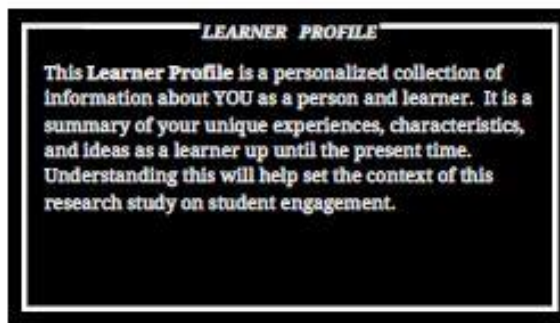
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Appendix A

Individual Interview #1

Focused Life History of the Learner



WHO AM I?

LEARNING PREFERENCES & ENVIRONMENT

PERSISTENCE

PREFERRED STUDY STRATEGIES

 Click to add text

SUCCESS IS...

HOW DO I DEFINE SUCCESS?

HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM SUCCESSFUL?

PART 1: Approaching New Learning. Highlight the answers that best describe you as an individual.

	Fixed	Mixed	Growth	Reflective Statement
Taking on Challenges	I feel confident when I face challenges and I know I will succeed. I feel that challenges are to be avoided.	I sometimes believe that challenges are to be avoided, but I have had some success with them in the past.	I feel challenged by the work I do and I know I will succeed. I feel that challenges are to be embraced.	
Parameters # (focus on work)	I have clear parameters for my work. I know what I need to do to succeed.	I have some parameters for my work, but I sometimes find myself going beyond them.	I have flexible parameters for my work. I know what I need to do to succeed, but I am open to change.	
Asking Questions	I do not ask questions. I feel that I should know the answers.	I sometimes ask questions, but I feel that I should know the answers.	I ask questions frequently. I feel that I should know the answers, but I am open to learning.	
Taking Risks	I do not take risks. I feel that I should know the answers.	I sometimes take risks, but I feel that I should know the answers.	I take risks frequently. I feel that I should know the answers, but I am open to learning.	

PART 2: Reflecting on Learning. Highlight the answers that best describe you as an individual.

	Fixed	Mixed	Growth	Reflective Statement
Learning from Mistakes	I see mistakes as failures. I feel that I should know the answers.	I sometimes see mistakes as failures, but I feel that I should know the answers.	I see mistakes as temporary setbacks. I feel that I should know the answers, but I am open to learning.	
Accepting Feedback and criticism	I do not accept feedback. I feel that I should know the answers.	I sometimes accept feedback, but I feel that I should know the answers.	I accept feedback frequently. I feel that I should know the answers, but I am open to learning.	
Practice and Applying Strategies	I do not practice or apply strategies. I feel that I should know the answers.	I sometimes practice or apply strategies, but I feel that I should know the answers.	I practice or apply strategies frequently. I feel that I should know the answers, but I am open to learning.	

LEARNING SUCCESSSES & OBSTACLES

<p>LEARNING SUCCESSSES</p> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <p>SKILLS</p> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <p>MINDSET/DISPOSITION</p> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>OBSTACLES</p> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <p>WHAT DO I WANT TO IMPROVE AT:</p> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
---	--

SUPPORT TEAM

<p>The following adults are people who I have gone to for support and guidance for my past learning successes and obstacles:</p> <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>The following peers are people who I have gone to for support and guidance for my past learning successes and obstacles:</p> <input type="checkbox"/>
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Appendix B

Individual Interview #2 and Focus Group Interview #1

Focus on the Concrete Details of the Secondary School Lived Experience of Learners

Using the following open-ended prompts and questions, I will ask learners to reconstruct the details of their engagement in learning in classrooms, school, family, and neighborhood or community.

1. Tell me as much as possible about what you actually do on a school day from the time you wake-up, throughout your day at school, after-school, and until you go asleep? (**Grand Tour**: Seeking reconstructed descriptive details of how their daily experience looks and feels).

- A. Listening for an opportunity to use these follow-up exploratory question prompts:
- B. How do you feel when you are doing (insert descriptive details)?
- C. What was that like for you?
- D. What happened when...?
- E. Could you tell me a story or give an example about what you are discussing?

2. Looking at the four various states of experience on the graphic representation of engagement (Appendix C), describe a **class** or **classes** which represent one or more of the states of engagement. (**Mini Tour**: Seeking descriptive details of how a particular classroom engagement experience looks and feels). Listening for an opportunity to use these follow-up exploratory prompts:

- A. What are you doing when you are in the _____ state of engagement in class? (e.g. in relationships with other learners and teachers; in relationship with particular classroom environments; in relationship with particular curriculums, assignments, technology devices, etc.; in relationship with particular school-wide environments; in relationship with coaches, sponsors, or other school personnel).
- B. How do you feel when you are in the _____ state of engagement?
- C. What was that like for you?
- D. What happened when...?
- E. Could you tell me a story or give an example from being in this state of engagement?

3. Looking at the four various states of experience on the graphic representation of engagement, which states of engagement describe your learning at **home**? (**Mini Tour:** Seeking descriptive details of how the participant's learning experience at home looks and feels).

Listening for an opportunity to use these follow-up exploratory question prompts:

- A. What are you doing when you are in the _____ state of engagement? (e.g. in relationships with parents, siblings, extended family members; in particular family environments).
- B. How do you feel when you are in the _____ state of engagement at home?
- C. What was that like for you?
- D. What happened when...?
- E. Could you tell me a story or give an example from being in this state of engagement at home?

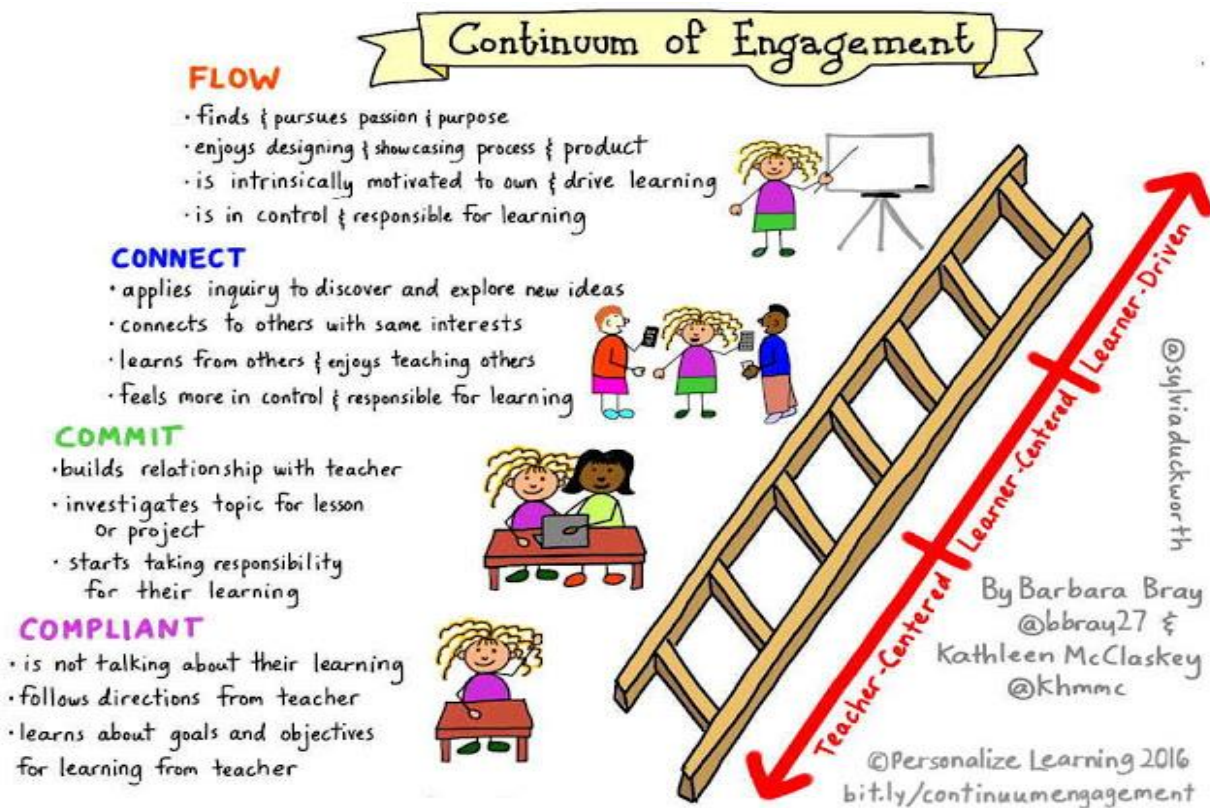
4. Looking at the four various states of experience on the graphic representation of engagement, which states of engagement describe your learning in your neighborhood or community activity groups (i.e. job, internship, faith-based group, club sport, scouting group, etc.)? (**Mini Tour:** Seeking descriptive details of how the participant's learning experience in a neighborhood or community activity group looks and feels).

What are you doing when you are in the _____ state of engagement in your community activity group? (e.g. in relationships with group leaders, other youth participants; in particular neighborhood or community environments; in relationships with bosses, mentors, or co-

workers). Listening for an opportunity to use these follow-up exploratory question prompts:

- A. How do you feel when you are in the _____ state of engagement in your community activity group, internship, or job?
- B. What was that like for you?
- C. What happened when...?
- D. Could you tell me a story or give an example from being in this state of engagement in your community activity group or in your job?

Appendix C



Appendix D

Individual Interview #3 and Focus Group Interview #2

Focus on the Meaning of the Experiences of Engagement of Learners

1. Given what you have said about your life, school, classroom, family, and community experiences of engagement in learning **before** you became a secondary school learner at the junior high *or* high school level, how do you make sense of engagement with learning?

2. Given what you have said about your experiences of engagement as a secondary school learner at the junior high *or* high school level, how do you understand engagement with learning now?

3. Given what you have talked about in these interviews, how do you see yourself going forward as a learner in the future?

A. At home?

B. In classrooms and at school for the rest of your secondary school years?

C. In your community?

4. Given what you have shared in these interviews, how many adults at school would you say know you really well? (ex., your likes, dislikes, learning styles, interest, dreams, hopes, fears, activities, and involvements).

Follow-up prompt: Which adults at school know you the best and take the strongest interest in your development as a learner and a person?

5. Given what you have shared in these interviews, how comfortable are you being yourself at school?

Follow-up: How are you encouraged to create and express your own identity as a learner at school?

Appendix E

Individual Interview #3

Narrative Writing Prompts

Directions: Read the prompts below. Please answer and write out your responses on the Google form provided. You can write about whatever you want. It can be about your experiences in any of your classes or it can be about your general thoughts about school. You can write using any form or genre of your choosing (e.g. narrative, fiction, poetry).

Prompt 1: When you think of school, tell me the first story that comes to your mind about your experiences?

Prompt 2: The times I am most excited in school are...

Prompt 3: The times I am the most bored in school are...

Prompt 4: The times I am most happy at school are....

Prompt 5: Is there anything else about school you would like for me to know?

Prompt 6: Fill in the following blanks. My school would be more engaging if

_____. My teachers would be more engaging if _____?

Prompt 7: If you could pass on one piece of advice to school leaders and teachers about what they could do to make school engaging for all learners, what would it be?

Appendix F

Purposeful Sample Screening Survey

- 1. Are you enrolled as a learner in the _____ Public Schools? Yes ___ No ___

- 2. Are you involved in at least one extra-curricular activity or athletics opportunity with the _____ Public Schools? Yes ___ No ___ Please provide which extra-curricular opportunities you are involved with here:

- 3. Are you involved in at least one community group activity? Yes ___ No ___ (Example: Boys & Girls Club, Church Youth Group, Club Sports Team, Dance Studio, RecPlex Activities, Swim Team, Junior Rotary, etc.). Please provide which community group opportunities you are involved with here:

Appendix G



Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

March 27, 2017

MEMORANDUM

TO: Bryan Bronn
John Pijanowski

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 17-03-540

Protocol Title: *Tapping the Voices of Learners for Creating Authentic Student Engagement*

Review Type: EXEMPT EXPEDITED FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 03/27/2017 Expiration Date: 03/26/2018

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<https://vpred.uark.edu/units/rscp/index.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 20 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.