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The Manifestation of Student Engagement in Classrooms: A Phenomenological Case Study of How Teachers Experience Student Engagement and How It Influences Pedagogical Decision Making

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THE MANIFESTATION OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN
CLASSROOMS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY OF
HOW TEACHERS EXPERIENCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND
HOW IT INFLUENCES PEDAGOGICAL DECISION MAKING

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The Manifestation of Student Engagement in Classrooms: A Phenomenological Case Study of How Teachers Experience Student Engagement and How It Influences Pedagogical Decision Making

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the essence of student engagement and how it impacted teacher pedagogical decision making in elementary classrooms. Through phenomenological case study, seven participants described their lived understanding of student engagement in order to develop a contextually-based understanding of the phenomenon. This study took place in an urban area of the Southwestern United States where students of color make up a majority of the school's population. This study found that the essence of student engagement is student interaction and that teachers make pedagogical decisions before and during their lessons in order to engage students or to re-engage student. An additional finding included the importance of social skills. Additional contributions to the field include student engagement via cooperative learning provides more equitable access to education for students of color, and student engagement seems to improve teacher efficacy. Implications for future research include suggestions for enhancing teacher education programs, understanding engagement across contexts, studying the impact of student engagement from prior grade levels on present grade level engagement, and whether social skills deemed admirable in public schools intertwine or merge with outside contexts.

Keywords: student engagement, pedagogical decision making

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Finally, thank you to my family who has supported this journey from the first day!

Dedication

This work is dedicated to each of my three nieces.

Always remember:

Persevere...

even when it's hard,

even when you don't want to,

and even if you think you don't need to.

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Chapter 1: Introducing the Study

Introduction

Since the beginning of public schooling, educators have been faced with challenges of formidable proportions: (a) improved test scores are paramount; (b) new standards require higher levels of rigor; and (c) closing achievement gaps around minoritized student groups (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The demands on teachers to teach all students to effectively demonstrate conceptual understanding of grade level curricula, regardless of culture or socially-imposed differences, continues to escalate (Harbour, Evanovich, Sweigart, & Hughes, 2015). Often times, educators rely on what they think are sound instructional practices when what is really needed is a refocused energy to engage students at their core (Kagan, 2009; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Engaged students exhibit an active disposition toward learning and demonstrate purposeful effort in classroom learning activities (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The level to which students are engaged in their learning impacts their interest in schooling and, therefore, their academic achievement (Reyes, Bracket, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012).

The following pages examine how federal policies and shifts in teacher attitudes and behaviors have led us to where we are today in terms of understanding student engagement. The problem statement and statement of purpose of this study follow. The researcher's personal connection to the topic then leads into the research questions. After a brief explanation of phenomenological case study is outlined and operational definitions are laid out, the importance of this study is presented.

Education Debt

Ladson-Billings (2006) uses the history of economic financial deficits and the related debt of the United States as an analogy to powerfully describe the historical, economic,

sociopolitical, and moral components of the “education debt” that has accumulated over hundreds of years in the United States. By defining the difference between national deficit and national debt (i.e. national deficit meaning the amount that is spent beyond generated income and national debt meaning how that financial shortfall grows over time), Ladson-Billings (2006) writes that disparities in education can be considered a debt, because inequities in access to quality education for minority groups have continued to grow. Even when adjustments to the education machine are made and improvements are seen, the education debt from centuries of inequities can never be fully eliminated.

Historical Debt

Historical debt in education can be traced back to the treatment of Native Americans, the enslavement of African Americans, and other disadvantaged groups (i.e. groups formed around race, class, gender, etc.). Since the beginning of colonization in North America, policymakers have often attempted to make substantive changes to laws regarding equity in education. For example, The Civil Rights Act (1964) was landmark legislation passed by the United States Congress that began the desegregation of schools. Although the powers given to enforce the act were weak, education leaders across the United States began what they considered, perhaps to a small extent, to be forthright attempts to enact the legislation. As a product of a survey requested by The Civil Rights Act (1964), the Equality of Educational Opportunity Report (Coleman et al., 1966) outlined the prevalence of equal educational opportunities for several different races compared with opportunities available to their White peers. Similar research has continued since to examine the academic achievement gaps between groups. Although primarily based on race, student achievement gaps among other groups have been studied (i.e. gender, language learners, and students with identified cognitive disabilities). More recently, the No Child Left Behind Act

(NCLB) (2001) called for greater accountability in order to shrink these gaps, and states have since reported data by groups determined by student characteristics.

Achievement gaps are often defined as disparities in academic achievement between minoritized students as compared with their White peers (National Governors' Association, 2005). While the achievement of Hispanic and Black students has fluctuated over time, so has the achievement of White students. This indicates that even though improvement has been made in educating Hispanic and Black students, similar improvement has been made educating White students, thereby causing no shrinkage of the overall gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Even though the term *achievement gap* has become a prevalent term, Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests that the phrase leads us "toward short-term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem" (p. 4) of inequities in education for minoritized students.

Over the years, scholars have provided a large number of explanations for why the achievement gap exists, including "the composition of school (who attends it), the students' sense of control of the environments and their futures, the teacher's verbal skills, and their students' family backgrounds" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 4). While the success or failure of students cannot be placed solely on schools, research does show that school experiences can have a profound effect on students' lives, often in positive ways (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Jackson & Davis, 2000, Ryan & Patrick, 2001, Wang & Dishion, 2012).

Economic Debt

A second piece of the education debt is a result of economics. Ladson-Billings (2006) writes that funding disparities frequently exist between schools serving students of color and White students, noting that "separate schooling always allows for differential funding" (p. 6). The differences in funding between urban and suburban schools illuminates the value placed on

the education of different and varied student groups. The Center for Reinventing Public Education (Carey & Roza, 2008) reports that at every level of government, “policymakers give more resources to students who have more resources, and less to those who have less” (p. 9). Even though federal funding of education had grown to nearly \$13 billion per year by 2006, the formula for distributing Title I funds is related to the amount of money states spend per pupil (Carey & Roza, 2008). As a result, the financial inequities already at play between states further educational inequities because more money is given per student to the districts in wealthy states than the districts in poor states. The U.S. Department of Education (March 13, 2015) reports the richest 25 percent of school districts receive approximately 15.6% more state and local funding than the poorest 25% of school districts resulting in a funding gap of nearly \$1,500 per student. In the state where this study took place, “the highest minority districts spend 30% less per student than the lowest minority districts” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, “Education Funding Shortchanges Low-Income, Minority Students,” para. 6).

The second area of economic importance within education debt is related earning potential to years in schooling (Ladson-Billings, 2006). More schooling is associated with higher earning potential (i.e. those with high school degrees earn more than those without a degree and those with a college degree earn more than those with just a high school degree), and wealth is a direct source of political and social power (Altonji & Doraszelski, 2005).

Sociopolitical Debt

Sociopolitical debt refers to the degree to which communities of color are excluded from the civic processes through which they can access political change (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As it relates to education debt, minority families have regularly been excluded (i.e. by muting their voices and marginalization) from the decision making conversations that would potentially

ensure a quality education for their children. Limited access to political figures has prohibited minority families from establishing the social capital that their White counterparts have.

Often times, the sociopolitical context plays out as a struggle over power and privilege. In the post-NCLB society, The Forum for Education and Democracy (2010) suggests a set of five assumptions that would provide a more inclusive education system: (a) equity of access to high-quality education; (b) high-quality teaching; (c) a school culture that is challenging, supportive, and engaging; (d) multiple sources of evidence to measure student success; and (e) an engaged and valued community involved in meaningful decision making. These types of system-wide practices would help ensure an equitable educational opportunity for all groups, and help build the capacity of schools to offer high-quality learning opportunities for all (The Forum for Education and Democracy, 2010).

Moral Debt

Ladson-Billings (2006) writes that moral debt “reflects the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do” (p. 8) through personal and social responsibility. While it is impossible to undo past exclusions from social benefits and educational opportunities from minority groups throughout our country’s history, we can begin to work toward changes in legal and social policy to help keep this moral debt from accruing.

Addressing Education Debt

The Education Debt that we face in the United States seems insurmountable. If we look toward the implications for the future of our students and our communities, each person in our community should consider themselves a stake-holder in present-day school systems. Berliner (2009) writes that the only way to ensure equity in education is to eliminate poverty itself. “Unfortunately, educational practitioners can’t eliminate poverty on their own. And we can’t

afford to wait, and poor families can't afford to wait, for poverty to be eliminated" (Gorski, 2013, p. 49). How we educate, or should be educating, students, regardless of color or status, is important for the livelihood of our communities and for our country's role as a leader among nations. Perhaps a good first step would be to examine how teachers make positive impacts on each of their students through their teaching each day.

Teachers play an important role in many aspects of school via high-quality teaching and by creating, nurturing, and maintaining a classroom culture that is challenging, supportive, and engaging. It is this type of learning environment which ultimately supports or challenges a student's engagement in learning (Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

The premise that all children can learn is a concept that has been embraced by policy makers and the public alike. What is harder to ascertain is whether all students have access to the tools, knowledge, and guidance they need to succeed. In many areas addressed in this survey, from teacher quality, to school building conditions, to challenging curricula and high expectations, many low income students and ethnic minority students and their teachers and principals constantly give responses that indicate these students do not have the same opportunities to learn, when compared to responses of those in schools with largely high income populations or in schools with a low proportion of ethnic minority students. (Markow, Fauth, & Gravitch, 2001, p. 6)

This study, in particular, focused on teachers in urban schools. Teachers who are successful in urban schools believe that all students are capable learners, and they believe they have the ability to communicate that belief to their students (Zeichner, 2003). Additionally, successful teachers in urban schools typically do not blame students, or the students' parents, for failure (Haberman, 1995). A classist view would purport that poverty causes academic failure.

Although poverty can negatively impact student achievement, successful urban educators believe that students can be successful in spite of poverty, discrimination, and other problems (Nieto & Bode, 2012).

Students and parents are not able, regardless of heroic effort, to tackle all of these aspects, many of which align with education debt described above. While teachers can do little to transform the living conditions in which their students live, they can work to break down barriers to student learning and support the limitless futures of their students (Nieto & Bode, 2012). As researchers and educators, our time is better spent trying to determine how students, in spite of seemingly insurmountable obstacles (i.e., types of education debt), can achieve appropriately challenging and rigorous academic goals. Engaging students in their learning is perhaps one panacea in a field known for hyping a capacious arsenal of silver bullets. This is why what teachers say and do in classrooms, rather than the presumed shortcomings of students, was the basis of the transformation this study examined.

Problem Statement

Student engagement is significant in current educational policy, research, and practice because it is vital to academic achievement. Research consistently shows that maximizing student engagement stimulates improved achievement in all student groups (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Fredericks et al., 2004; Harbour et al., 2015). Student engagement is critical to improving the student achievement that our federal, state, and local policymakers expect, as well as what our students, their parents, and communities deserve. Especially because classroom teachers are, increasingly, being held publicly accountable for raising students' test score, a focus on engaging students in learning is fundamental.

As new federal and state policies call for students to be prepared beyond high school, teachers are being charged to “step up their game” in order to provide adequately skilled workers for a global economy as well as enriched, enlightened, and thoughtful problem solvers for the betterment of our communities (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). While most consider this task easier said than done, engaging students in their learning is imperative (Wang & Degol, 2014). But how do teachers create learning situations that engage students each day? How do teachers experience student engagement? How does that experience shape future pedagogical decisions?

Personal Connection to the Study

My student teaching experience was exceptional. I worked with cooperating teachers from whom I learned a great deal about how to teach kids with great passion. The school I was working in was in an upper middle-class suburb of a Midwestern city. From my limited experience as a new teacher, and from my own experience as an elementary student nearly two decades before, it appeared that every student came to school having been fed, with completed homework, and with full concentration to exert towards their learning. If the classroom needed supplies for a special project, we sent a note home and the materials flooded into the school. If we needed parents to help at the school carnival, we had more volunteers than we could use. Student misbehavior was nil.

When it was time for me to have my own group of students the following school year, I found myself walking into a classroom with a chalkboard hanging from the wall by a thread and cavernous, sterile hallways displaying no student work. Most students walked to school with their siblings or, often times, alone. Parents were nowhere to be seen. My classroom was in a school whose population was labelled “at risk” in an urban area in a large city in the Southern United States. My students arrived and I realized that I was the only person of color, at least of

my color, in the room. Sparse amounts of supplies were provided by the school, and I paid for whatever else we needed. When parent teacher conferences rolled around, no parents showed up, perhaps considering “no news” to be “good news”. I lasted one year in that school. Looking back, I consider my work there to be a disservice to that group of students. I was not prepared. I did not have the tools I needed to succeed. I knew nothing about teaching students who lived in poverty.

I worked with a principal the following year (back in the Midwest) who often used the term “circle of influence” to describe what our priorities as teachers, and as humans, should be. Steven Covey (2013) describes one’s circle of influence as a group of things, situations, or ideas over which we have some control that often help us determine our behavior and how we choose to expend our energy each day towards a solution to these concerns. I realized that I could influence and address what was happening (or not happening) in my classroom. With that in mind, I considered my second year of teaching to be a new beginning.

With the help of a new teacher induction program, an excellent teacher mentor, and a supportive principal, I began to chart my own course for helping students living in poverty. Many of the out-of-school-factors that impacted students were in my “circle of concern”, yet not within my circle of influence. For example, low birth weights, lack of medical care, factors that affect the residential options of families, and stressors in the home are just a few things that Berliner (2009) cites as out of a teacher’s control, yet still factors into the overall achievement gaps. Even though I worked with a diverse group of students and educational inequities were still a legitimate concern, as an advocate for social change in my own way, engaging students in their learning was how I could impact each student in a positive way. I had a few hits, and more

misses than I care to admit, but engaging students in their learning was something within my circle of influence.

As I began to implement more engaging structures in my lessons, I began to see smiles on faces, students who cared for and supported each other, and improvement in student achievement. I know my story, but how do other teachers understand and experience student engagement? How does that experience impact their pedagogical decision making? This study has been a direct result of my own journey and my desire to understand the journeys of others.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of student engagement as it manifested in elementary classrooms. Using phenomenological case study, this study explored how seven teachers experienced student engagement in their classrooms and how their pedagogical decision-making shifted when they experienced students' engagement.

Topic Rationale

Student engagement is as multi-faceted as the definition of the construct itself (Fredericks et al., 2004; Parsons & Taylor, 2011), and requires great effort on the part of many people (Kagan, 2009). Students who are engaged in their learning participate, exert effort, and exhibit interest and motivation in their learning, and that engagement is critical to improving student achievement (Fredericks et al., 2004). These dimensions of student engagement provide challenges to researchers and practitioners alike primarily because of the many forces that affect and influence student engagement from moment to moment (Reschly & Christenson, 2012).

This study connected teachers' understanding of engagement with the pedagogical decisions they made to keep students engaged. When teachers saw students interacting and engaging with content in the ways described above, teachers made decisions about how to

proceed in order to maintain or recreate that engagement, rather than ways for students simply to accomplish their “on paper” tasks. In many public schools that serve primarily African American and Latino student groups, “the teachers who believe in [their students] and push them, who refuse to accept anything less than the best from them, often make the single greatest difference between a life of hope and despair” (Nieto, 2003, p. 14).

Student engagement is foundational, not just for students, but for teachers—when students are engaged in learning, teachers become engaged in and enjoy teaching. Nieto (2003) writes that most teachers enter the profession with tremendous enthusiasm and a noble desire to make a positive difference in the lives of students. Teachers who provide structures in their lessons that promotes student engagement each day are likely to see students who try hard, accept learning challenges in the classroom, and make strides in improving their learning. As a result, teachers may likely remember why they decided to become teachers in the first place and may be inspired to stay in the profession to positively impact young lives for years to come.

Research Questions

This phenomenological case study was framed by one main research question and one ancillary research question. The nature of phenomenological case study, however, is such that these guiding research questions could have furnished a variety of viable outcomes (Creswell, 1998).

Main Research Question: What is the meaning, structure, and essence of teachers’ lived experience of student engagement in an elementary classroom?

Ancillary Question: How do elementary teachers use the lived experience of student engagement to make future pedagogical decisions?

By answering these questions, this study identified how teachers experience students' engagement in their classroom (i.e., via students' actions, responses, or other feedback) and how teachers made pedagogical decisions once they had experienced the phenomenon in their classroom.

Phenomenological Case Study Method

This study employed a phenomenological case study method. Phenomenology is particularly useful when the purpose of a study is to understand how a specific phenomenon manifests and appears in the world and the meanings of human experiences from new perspectives (Creswell, 1998). The phenomenological approach differs from other qualitative methodologies because its focus is on the understandings of a group of teachers' experiences instead of the claims of individual participants. The focus here is to understand multiple interpretations within the group of participants, describing how things are experienced firsthand of the everyday world by the involved teachers as a group (Vagle, 2014).

Case study aligns nicely with phenomenology as it is "a descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory analysis of a person, group, or event" (Thomas, 2011, p. 513). One of the significant benefits of case study, especially as related to this research proposal, is the emphasis on the unique characteristics of each case, and each teacher's subjective explanation of that case (Stake, 1999). These two approaches focus on the unique experiences of educators and how, together, the "essence" of the particular phenomena can be studied by determining how people are meaningfully connected with and through the phenomena. Ultimately, the final result of phenomenological case study is "a description that presents the essence of a phenomenon so the reader has a strong sense of how I understand what it is like to have experienced that particular phenomenon" (Vagle, 2014, p. 27).

Phenomenology and case study were particularly appropriate for this study as they sought to enable the researcher to understand how student engagement, as a real-life phenomenon in classrooms, was experienced by teachers. This data was used to determine how those experiences were interpreted and how meaning was derived from those experiences, specifically how the outcomes of student engagement impacted pedagogical decision making.

Operational Definitions

Extant literature is rife with different interpretations of the meaning of student engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). The multitude of definitions of student engagement makes determining a single, working definition of the concept hard to frame. However, what researchers do seem to agree upon appears to be triadic in nature.

First, researchers agree that engagement is malleable, meaning it can be influenced and shaped by pedagogy and other interventions (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Second, student engagement represents a direct in-road to learning (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Research indicates that once engagement occurs, powerful learning outcomes often follow (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004). The third widely understood notion about student engagement is that it is theoretically distinct from student motivation (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). While motivation typically reflects the direction of a student's stamina toward school (Assor, 2012), engagement represents the direction of that energy through behavioral, emotional, and cognitive action (Fredericks et al., 2004). Some researchers have gone so far as to call engagement *energy in action* (Ainley, 2012).

For the purpose of this study, student engagement was defined as behavioral participation, emotional willingness, and cognitive investment in learning tasks manifested through positive interdependence (i.e. one student doing well helps others do well, meaning

student task completion is a function of a cooperative classroom culture), individual accountability (i.e. each student must perform some part of the learning task on their own in front of their peers and/or the teacher), equal participation (i.e. each student is afforded approximately equal time or equal turns), and simultaneous interaction (i.e. students demonstrate the sense that they are engaged/feel engaged through their classroom behavior) (Fredericks et al., 2004; Kagan, 1994).

Student engagement is often manifested by using specific structures that encourage or provide the aforementioned characteristics (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). Structures are defined as instructional strategies, appropriate for all content areas and contexts, specifically designed to promote cooperation and communication in the classroom, increase students' confidence in learning tasks, while increasing interest in appropriate classroom interaction (Kagan, 2009). In practice, the teacher would provide direct instruction and then, instead of leading the whole group in a question and answer activity related to the direct instruction content, choose a structure that involves all students, in part by fostering sharing and cooperation (Kagan, Kagan, & Kagan, 2012). Structures provide ways for teachers to shape student interaction for learning within any content area (Kagan & Kagan, 2009).

It is important to note that the type of student engagement described above may simply look like "group work" upon first examination. This is not the case. Group work typically does not have the attributes iterated above; further, in group work, students are able to opt out of their participatory role within the group.

Importance of Study

For the past 35 years, student engagement has become an increasingly popular research topic, primarily for its potential as an antidote for the age-old problems of student boredom and

underachievement (Wang & Degol, 2014). This study examined how teachers experienced the phenomenon of student engagement and how it impacted their pedagogical decision making. This study contributes to the broader understanding of how teachers' decision making affects the continuation of student engagement in their own classrooms. Because student engagement is imperative for successful learning (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008), this study provides a new approach to understanding student engagement as a phenomenon and the impact teachers have on its presence in the classroom. By doing so, this study intends to begin reducing our nation's education debt, even if in a small way.

Summary

This chapter provided a rationale for a phenomenological case study of how teachers experienced student engagement and how that engagement influenced the pedagogical decisions these teachers made in their elementary classrooms.

Chapter 2 focuses on the empirical literature regarding student engagement. It also addresses a gap in the literature that called for this study. The methodology for this study is detailed in Chapter 3. The findings from this study are included in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the findings and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to this study of how teachers experience the phenomenon of student engagement in their classrooms and how that experience impacts their pedagogical decision making. Also explored was a rationale and personal connection to the topic. After a brief overview of phenomenological case study method, operational definitions and the importance of this study was identified.

Chapter 2 explores the history of and theories related to student engagement, the different types of student engagement, and how contextual factors can affect them. Ultimately, by examining empirical and theoretical literature, this review illuminates the importance of this study by identifying gaps in both historical and current literature. The methodology for the proposed study is outlined in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 follows with the study results. The last chapter analyzes those findings and looks toward future research possibilities.

A Brief History of Student Engagement

The interpretation and implementation of student engagement has undergone a transformation from the 1980s to present-day. There have been three major shifts in the definition and purpose of student engagement: (a) to help disengaged and disadvantaged students achieve and participate in schooling; (b) to assist in classroom management; and (c) to engage students in learning about learning (Parsons & Taylor, 2011). It is important to understand how student engagement has developed, in order to clearly understand the status of the concept today.

Helping Disengaged and Disadvantaged Students Achieve and Participate

Nearly 35 years ago, student engagement emerged as an academic construct focusing on students' time-on-task and participation (Harris, 2008). The study of student engagement

developed in response to student *dis*-engagement, which as considered to be a cause of poor student achievement or students dropping out of school altogether (Parsons & Taylor, 2011). Student engagement was put forth as a possible solution to some of the more tenacious education problems that faced students, including underachievement and learning, behavioral, and emotional difficulties (Shernoff, Csikszentmihayli, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003).

Gilbert (2007) describes the educational system at that time as being only 150 years old, but built on Industrial Age concepts of “mass education [created to] ensure egalitarianism and the economic need for people with the skills and dispositions necessary for work in the Industrial Age enterprises” (p. 6). The education system was described as attempting mass produce a group of students in order to supply similarly skilled workers for the public good. “This produced large gaps between the highest- and the lowest-achieving students. Large numbers of students didn’t measure up to the system’s standards” (Gilbert, 2007, p. 7). Student engagement was considered to be a potential solution for the issue of inequitable access to education for students at risk of not achieving in an Industrial Age system of schooling.

Inquiries into the needs of minoritized students led to student engagement being used as a way to improve the participation of the disengaged student (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009). The notion of creating a “sense of belonging” began to develop in the 1980s to meet the needs of disadvantaged students who were failing or showing no signs of academic improvement.

When student engagement first emerged in the late 1980s, researchers tended to view its “causes” almost exclusively through the lens of demographic and social risk factors attributed to individual students (e.g. family circumstances, influences of peers). Over time, however, the concept and its measures began to shift in meaning as a result of increased attention to the influence of school context, particularly the relationships

between school climate and students' experience of engagement (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009, p. 7).

A student's sense of belonging appeared to complement student engagement. Research on the impact of student engagement on levels of participation and sense of belonging continues today (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009).

Establishing Better Classroom Management

Throughout the 1990s, student engagement became a tool used to dissuade students from misbehaving and maintaining students' compliance (Harris, 2008). As a classroom management strategy, teachers began to develop a variety of strategies to engage students in their work (Parsons & Taylor, 2011). Although teachers did move toward teaching practices featuring interesting and fun activities, the focus of student engagement continued to be about fixing a problem instead of the benefits of engaging students in their learning. Students were expected to participate in ritual and procedural activities, achieving the learning goals established by the teacher and doing so in the way prescribed by the teacher. The curriculum remained the same, the teacher still directed learning opportunities, and students tried to follow along (Shernoff et al., 2003).

As student misbehaviors decreased, educators began notice that students not only could participate and pass courses, but could also enjoy learning. In a study on optimal states of learning, Shernoff et al. (2003) found that even when students were demonstrating academic growth by participating in class, some students were still disengaged. Increased rates of boredom, alienation, and students feeling no sense of *belonging* became the norm. As teachers began to transition into more enjoyable learning activities suited to engaging students in their learning, the theory of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) emerged. Flow theory refers to a person

being fully immersed in an activity. When a person experiences flow, they tend to have an energized focus and enjoy the activity. Often times during flow, the person loses track of time because they feel completely involved in the task (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

The connections between student engagement and flow led to a conceptualization of student engagement “based on concentration, interest, and enjoyment” (Shernoff et al., 2003, p. 163). Because of its intrinsic nature, students do not want flow experiences to end, and teachers must find that “flow moment” in order to help students enjoy their learning (Parsons & Taylor, 2011, p. 12).

At this point in the history of student engagement, concepts like *flow* and *personalized interest* in the classroom began to interact with specific content standards and pedagogical structures. Teachers were still considered the experts who knew what students needed to know and how they could learn it best. This train of thought would be challenged, though, by future research on student engagement from 2000 forward.

Engaging All Students in Learning About Learning

In the early 2000s, the focus of student engagement began to shift toward proactive improvement in learning pedagogy, referring to helping students understand how they learn best (Parsons & Taylor, 2011). Research up to this point tended to focus on finding ways of enticing students to learn from a prescribed curriculum, instead of being process-driven and learning-focused (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009; Harris, 2008).

Research soon pointed toward a new purpose for increasing student engagement: to enhance all students’ motivation to learn (National Research Council & Medical Institute, 2004). They wrote that fostering students’ motivation to learn is a key factor in the success or failure of

education, and by the time students entered secondary schools, disengagement from school was commonplace.

The consequences of this disengagement are often much more serious for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds because they do not usually get a second chance; students from more privileged backgrounds frequently do. The primary ingredients that foster involvement and motivation to learn are competence and control, beliefs about the value of education, and sense of belonging (National Research Council & Medical Institute, 2004, p. ix).

As the terms *knowledge society* and *information age* became popular, educators began to reassess their pedagogy and curriculum to sufficiently prepare students for their lives and careers (Gilbert, 2007). Educators began to move towards a new way of being, supported by access to technology and instant access to world-wide information, thus prompting a revision of pedagogical methods. Along with these conversations came a shift in the control of learning from the teacher to the student (Parsons & Taylor, 2011).

Researchers began to analyze student engagement as a way to increase student achievement and participation overall, as well as to build students' affective dispositions toward their own learning (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009; Harris, 2008). Students' understanding of their own learning processes started to emerge in classrooms and educators no longer focused on increasing engagement solely for academic achievement or behavior compliance. Instead, educators began to focus their pedagogy on harnessing students' interest and enjoyment of learning in a variety of subject areas. For example, Dunleavy and Milton (2009) suggested educators focus on "expanding our understanding of student engagement and its potential for

transforming classroom practices to enable *all* students to become deeply engaged in powerful learning experiences” (p. 5).

Student Engagement Today

Throughout its history, the concept of student engagement has become a way to understand and improve student achievement for all students, including those considered to be “at risk” (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). The notion of “at risk” is believed to have originated within the medical field. The Center for Disease Control defined health risk factors as “events, conditions, and behaviors in the life of any individual that modify the probability of occurrence of death and disease for that individual when compared to others...in the [same] general population” (Breslow, 1985, p. I-1). The parallel between this medical definition and the definition of “at risk” in education is clear.

While some of these “conditions” are nearly impossible to transform through classroom interventions (i.e. family socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, native language, family structure, etc.), researchers know what “at risk” students can feel and/or do to be academically successful (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Keeping students engaged in their learning is “viewed as a protective factor with respect to educational risk” (Finn & Zimmer, 2012, p. 99).

Researchers tend to agree that student engagement is a necessary and powerful predictor of student achievement (Appleton et al., 2008; Finn, 1993; Fredericks et al., 2004, Furlong & Christenson, 2008; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). When students are engaged with their schoolwork in middle school they are more likely to graduate from college than those who are not. Not only does engagement play an important role in the caliber of daily, school experiences, it also is viewed as key in the development of long-term learning styles and positive academic identity (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

The Role of Theory

Although established connections to existing research are often seen as a requirement of new research, attaching too many theories to student engagement is done with hesitation because of the nature of the proposed study. Phenomenology is to be used to determine or test ways in which humans experience the world (Vagle, 2014). With that in mind, and knowing that humans are fluid and ever-changing, the idea of attempting to understand a phenomenon and how it is experienced only to have it be constrained by a theory does not seem true to the purpose of this type of research. Even so, presented below are three theories connected specifically to student engagement and how it develops in classrooms.

Basic Needs Theory

Basic needs theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) contends that psychological well-being is a combination of the feelings of autonomy (i.e., experiencing behavior endorsed by the inner self of choice over actions), competence (i.e., the need to be effective in one's pursuits and interactions as well as seeking and mastering challenges), and relatedness (i.e., the need to establish close emotional bonds with others). All three of these needs are required for ideal mental and social functioning (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Basic needs theory contributes to self-determination theory by identifying students' inherent motivational resources (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Basic needs theory is connected to student engagement because it helps illuminate why students show active engagement in some situations while in other situations they may not. Basic needs theory also helps determine which aspects of the classroom environment will be supportive of students' engagement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In order to satisfy basic needs,

students seek out novelty, pursue optimal challenge, exercise and extend their capabilities, explore and learn (Reeve, 2012).

Flow Theory

Flow is a state of “deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically enjoyable” (Shernoff et al., 2003, p. 160). Developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), students in a state of flow believe their performance to be pleasurable and successful, and that the activity is desirable to do for its own sake, even if the end goal is not met (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Flow theory is based on the optimal balance of challenging tasks with the appropriate skills needed to meet those challenges (Shernoff et al., 2003). When flow is happening, anxiety and relaxation are absent.

Flow theory is connected to student engagement because providing the appropriate challenges in classrooms as well as opportunities to incrementally enhance skills is an ideal way to engage students (Shernoff et al., 2003). Academic growth can be fostered by the flow state because the feelings students experience are intrinsically rewarding and often lead students to seek and master new skills, developing greater levels of achievement (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). The simultaneous experience of concentration (i.e., complete concentration and absorption with a learning task), interest (i.e., important for becoming interested with a learning task or topic in the first place), and enjoyment (i.e. feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment that leads to future experiences with learning) are essential for flow to occur (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a constructivist approach to instruction in which students work in heterogeneous, small groups to help one another accomplish learning goals (Sharan, 2014).

Cooperative learning provides an alternative to competitive or individualistic classroom activities where students work against each other to achieve a goal that only one can attain (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). Roles also change in classrooms using cooperative learning: the teacher's role as an information transmitter is reduced and the student's role shifts toward that of group participant and decision maker (Emmer & Gerwels, 2002). Additional reasons for using cooperative learning include improved motivation, positive attitudes, and better social skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Slavin, 1995).

The defining features of cooperative learning activities vary somewhat. Essential features of cooperative learning include group tasks and goals, individual accountability, and some degree of interdependence among the students (Cohen, 1994; Slavin, 1995). Four identified concepts that characterize the roles of students in cooperative learning activities are: (a) positive interdependence; (b) individual accountability; (c) equal participation; and (d) simultaneous interaction (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan, 1994).

Other Related Theories

Self-determination theory. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is a theory of motivation which suggests people tend to be driven by a need to grow and gain fulfillment. The first assumption of self-determination theory is that people are activity-directed toward growth. A cohesive sense of self is developed when one gains mastery over challenges and takes in new experiences. Self-determination theory primarily focuses on sources of motivation such as a need to gain knowledge or independence (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

As it connects to student engagement, self-determination theory focuses attention on precursors of behavioral engagement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Self-determination theory also posits that all students possess inherent growth tendencies that provide a motivational foundation

for engagement and positive school functioning (Deci & Ryan, 1985). It assumes that positive engagement is likely to occur when the context provides opportunities to fulfill their basic needs of competence, belonging, and autonomy (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Achievement goal theory. Academic motivation is often studied and explained within a framework provided by achievement goal theory (Anderman & Patrick, 2012). Originally, the theory focused primarily on students' goal orientations, or on the reasons students give for engaging in particular tasks (Reeve, 2012). Two types of goals have been identified: mastery (i.e., focus on understanding and personal improvement) and performance (i.e., focus on outperforming others). When students pursue mastery goals, they are interested in truly mastering the task, they are concerned with gaining competence, and they are willing and eager to exert effort in order to achieve mastery (Anderman & Patrick, 2012).

As it relates to student engagement, students who are working on classroom mastery goals are more cognitively engaged, expend more effort, ask for help when needed, and express positive views about schoolwork. Students who are working on classroom performance goals (i.e. through direct competition with others) express more negative affect about school and less sense of belonging, view teachers as less fair, demonstrate lower academic achievement, and begin to focus on outcomes of their efforts more than on the process of their learning (Anderman & Patrick, 2012).

Types of Student Engagement

Conceptual haziness is the term often used to describe the present definition of student engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2004). Most scholars agree that student engagement is a multidimensional, meta-construct, involving aspects of students' behavior, emotion, and cognition (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredericks et al., 2004). Affective engagement is added to

some definitions (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), while an agentic component is included in others (Reeve, 2012). Many models, including these various subtypes, are now commonplace in the literature. As a result, student engagement suffers from what Reschly and Christenson (2012) call the *jingle and jangle effect* whereby the same term is used to refer to different things (i.e., jingle) and different terms are used for the same construct (i.e., jangle). The following paragraphs briefly explain these five types of engagement.

Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral engagement is commonly defined in three ways. The first definition involves positive conduct in school such as following classroom rules and norms, both written and unwritten (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). The second definition concerns students being involved in learning and academic tasks. A student who is behaviorally engaged shows persistence, concentration, attention, asks questions, and contributes to whole class or group discussions (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). The third definition of behavioral engagement includes participation in school-related activities, such as sports, music or drama groups, or student government. These types of behaviors typically increase as students move from early to middle childhood and into adolescence (Fredericks et al., 2004).

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement refers to students' visceral reactions in the classroom. Students who are emotionally engaged display interest and happiness, as well as lack of anxiety (Fredericks et al., 2004). Teachers are often the ones who nurture interest in school, and a significant part of emotional engagement involves positive interaction with multiple people. Learning is inherently social; it happens in the context of positive interactions and relationships with teachers, peers, family, experts, and others. These interactions help promote learning and

encourage a sense of belonging and liking school (Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Farm, 2012).

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement stresses a psychological investment in learning and a focused effort toward mastering knowledge or skills. Students who are cognitively engaged seek challenges and are often intrinsically motivated to persist when a task is challenging (Fredericks et al., 2004). When students are cognitively engaged, they begin to develop their own beliefs and interests which, in turn, drive future engagement. Teacher enthusiasm and teacher support can also predict cognitive engagement in students (Mahatmya et al., 2012).

Affective Engagement

Affective engagement is an emotional response characterized by feelings of involvement in school as a place and a set of activities worth pursuing. Students who are affectively engaged feel a sense of belonging in the school community and believe school is a significant part of their own lives. Ultimately, students who are affectively engaged recognize that school provides a set of tools for accomplishments to be made outside the school walls (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

A unique characteristic of affective engagement is its indirect link to academic achievement. Affective engagement appears to affect the other forms of engagement (i.e., behavioral, emotional, and cognitive), which in turn, affects learning (Osterman, 2000; Voelkl, 2012).

Agentic Engagement

Agentic engagement refers to the extent to which students are intentionally proactive with their learning. Reeve (2012) claims that “students not only react to learning activities but they *proact* on them—enriching them, modifying them, personalizing them, and even creating or

requesting the learning opportunity in the first place, rather than merely reacting to them as a given” (p. 154). In addition to demonstrating persistence, enjoyment, and strategic thinking, students also generate options that expand their freedom of action and increase the chance for both strong motivation and meaningful learning. In simpler terms, students become agents of their learning (Reeve, 2012).

For this study and as a framework for understanding teachers’ lived experience of student engagement, engagement is framed and studied within the context of elementary classrooms. Specifically, by the types of structures teachers implement, create, or discover that lead to students to be engaged in their learning.

In this study, student engagement was defined as behavioral participation, emotional willingness, and cognitive investment that manifests through positive interdependence (i.e. one doing well helps others and task completion depends on everyone), individual accountability (i.e. each student must perform some part of the learning task in front of others), equal participation (i.e. equal time or equal turns), and simultaneous interaction (i.e. students are either talking or writing and feeling engaged). Student engagement is often accomplished by using specific structures that embody the aforementioned characteristics (Kagan & Kagan, 2009).

Contextual Impacts on Student Engagement

Studying a single element of a student’s engagement in their learning is complicated because a student’s experience is impacted by multiple elements both in and outside of school walls (Perdue, Manzeske, & Estell, 2009). The complex nature of the construct has led to the examination of how context impacts student engagement (Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003; Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Reschly-Anderson, 2003).

The three themes that examine such contextual impacts include how student engagement is influenced by school factors, how peers and parents influence engagement, and how neighborhood and other extracurricular factors affect engagement. Students' involvement in and interactions with each of these groups or situations can, to some extent, impact their engagement in learning at school (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Reyes et al., 2012).

School Factors that Influence Student Engagement

Effective learning is directly related to the level at which students are engaged in daily, classroom learning activities (Chen, 2005; Osterman, 2000; Wang & Pomerantz, 2009). While some view student engagement as a trait or attribute of the student, others view a student's engagement in their own learning as a direct product of how teachers create and maintain environments conducive to learning, and subsequently focus their research on examining such efforts (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006; Patrick et al., 2007).

Classroom emotional climate (CEC) refers to the social and emotional relationships formed among students and teachers (Daniels & Shumow, 2003), and is thought to influence learning outcomes for students (Konstantopoulos, 2009). Teachers who are sensitive to student needs, take student perspectives into account, and refrain from using sarcasm and unreasonable disciplinary actions demonstrate the characteristics of CECs. Students who feel cared for and safe in their classrooms often demonstrate cooperation with each other and an interest in learning (Patrick et al., 2007). Teachers in CECs also tend to be acutely aware of their students' academic needs and provide instruction based on age-appropriate activities that encourage students to express themselves, their interests, and points of view.

Students in CECs report higher levels of engagement because of positive interactions with teachers who provide the space, safety, and confidence for learning to occur each day (Patrick et al., 2007). From the beginning of formal schooling, students who have a greater emotional bond with their teacher are typically more engaged in learning (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Additionally, students report greater interest, enjoyment, and engagement in classrooms where they feel emotionally supported by teachers and other school staff members (Curby, LoCasale-Crouch, Konold, & Pianta, 2009; Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009). Finally, students who feel emotionally supported within the classroom tend to choose more academically challenging activities and perform better on academic tasks, as evidenced through grades and standardized test scores (Rimm-Kaufan & Chiu, 2007; LaRocque & Mvududu, 2008). When teachers create a heightened sense of community, respond to the needs of students, and create and maintain positive relationships, academic success is likely a result, because students feel greater engagement and enthusiasm for learning (Reyes et al., 2012).

Peer and Parental Factors that Influence Student Engagement

One context that is also of particular importance is the impact of peer relationships on engagement in learning. Educational outcomes can be traced, in part, to the elements of the relationships between students and others, and these interactions have been linked to increased academic achievement over time (Ou, 2005). Academic achievement has also improved for students who have positive support mechanisms in place between themselves, their peers, and friends (Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007). The importance of these relationships has also been identified to have a theoretically important influence on school engagement (Garcia-Reid, 2007; Ou, 2005). Because students tend to become friends with others who have similar interests and attitudes towards school, those who work hard and value school may prefer peers who are

likewise engaged. Those who are not engaged academically more likely will become friends with others who demonstrate similar inclinations (Stanard, Belgrave, Corneille, Wilson, & Owens, 2010).

Parenting has also been found to impact student engagement in school, as parents are the first to help their children navigate through schooling. As a result, parents can greatly influence how students perceive their intellectual abilities, value learning, and become engaged in their learning (Eccles, Roeser, Vida, Fredericks, & Wigfield, 2006). Authoritative and responsive parenting has been positively associated with school engagement and achievement (Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994). Involved parents have also been linked to greater educational aspirations in students (Rumberger, 1995; Paulson, 1994), and parental control and demands have been positively correlated with classroom behavior and attention (de Bruyn, Dekovic, & Meijnen, 2003). Emotional bonds between family members, often known as family cohesion, is an important resource for students as they begin to encounter challenges at school (Annunziata, Hogue, Faw, & Liddle, 2006). Students who have cohesive families tend to receive more monitoring from their parents and, as a result, demonstrate increased engagement in school with fewer behavior problems (Kliewer et al., 2006).

Neighborhood and Extracurricular Factors that Influence Student Engagement

Relationships among school-aged youth are also important when considering how their connections within their neighborhoods and extracurricular activities influence their engagement in learning in school (Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005; Knifsend & Graham, 2012).

Although not factors mediated within school walls, neighborhood youth behavior and neighborhood safety have been linked to engagement through their effects on social support variables. Positive neighborhood youth behavior was found to be connected to higher levels of

parent support within homes. Students who had positive role models as friends within their neighborhood reported greater trust and closeness with their peers. This translated into being more positively engaged in school (Garcia-Reid et al, 2005).

Another set of relationships formed outside classrooms that impact engagement are those made through extra-curricular activities. Students who participate in extracurricular activities demonstrate a greater sense of belonging in school, engagement in learning, and improved achievement (Knifsend & Graham, 2012). Students feel a greater sense of belonging in school and maintain better grades when they are moderately involved in school activities (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). The positive effects of being connected to supportive peer groups who are interested in the same extracurricular skill has also been found to extend over time (Dworkin, Larson, & Hanson, 2003).

The types of engagement mentioned previously are the conceptual glue that holds the broader, contextual factors related to engagement together. When analyzing engagement through this type of broad, conceptual lens, it is hard to determine which factors not only encourage student engagement, but also how they impact one another in unknown ways. Each of these contextual variables impacts the engagement that students demonstrate in their own learning. While all of these contexts are valuable and worthy of consideration, it is the contextual factors related to teachers and the learning structures implemented in daily lessons that significantly shape the conceptual framework for this study.

Engagement in Urban Schools

Formal schooling in the United States, and the decisions made therein, is often associated with its mainstream culture and with a minority culture (Ogbu, 1992). For minority students, doing well in school, if based on the same criteria of doing well as the majority group, may be

perceived as incompatible with their cultural identity (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). Based on studies that have analyzed both ethnic identity and engagement, ethnic minority students who “have strong ethnic identities are more likely to be engaged in school than those who do not” (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012, p. 69). In a study of African American adolescents, having a weak racial identity was associated with poor student engagement, while having a strong racial identity was linked to stronger student engagement (Chavous et al., 2003).

In some cases, minority students may endorse, support, or value the importance of education more than their White peers, even though the minority students do less well in school (Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008). Students who are members of the non-dominant cultural or ethnic group appear to have a strong academic identity if they have a strong racial or ethnic identity (Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007). Having a bicultural identity may also play a role in achieving within the mainstream culture of schools (Okagaki, Helling, & Bingham, 2009). Social identity theorists suggest that students can, and often do, prescribe to multiple social identities, and the interplay of those identities direct behavior in school toward or away from engagement (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012).

Although variations in defining student engagement and an understanding of the contexts that impact student engagement outlined in the pages above are needed, research by Zyngier (2005, 2007, & 2008) indicates not all iterations of engagement lend themselves to support the academic success of marginalized students. For students who do not come from the dominant culture, “it is necessary (but not sufficient) to privilege student backgrounds in classrooms pedagogy” (Zyngier, 2005, p. 110). *Community of Learners* describes a classroom where adults and students are often engaged in learning in a way that can lead to work that is purposeful, relevant, and productive in changing academic outcomes (Rogoff, Turkkanis, & Bartlett, 2001).

Minoritized students appear to be more comfortable taking academic risks, establishing connectedness, and demonstrating engagement in a community of learners where they have developed a strong sense of identity (hooks, 1994).

Many students who may be labeled as “at risk” by virtue of their disadvantaged or low socioeconomic backgrounds do not believe their experiences in school will significantly impact their future (Zyngier, 2007). As mentioned previously, marginalized students need to feel a sense of belonging and identity with school. When these needs are developed through engagement in learning, teachers “create pedagogical practices that engage students providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply” (hooks, 1994, p. 22). These types of structures that teachers discover and create, which lead to students engaged in their learning, are the basis of this study.

Brief Review of Methodological Literature

As an overarching research method, phenomenology is the study of how a particular phenomenon manifests and appears in the world. It is a recommended methodology when the study goals are to understand the meanings of human experiences or to explore concepts from new and fresh perspectives (Creswell, 1998). A phenomenologist contemplates and theorizes the various ways phenomena manifest and appear in and through our being in the world. Vagle (2014) writes that phenomenology is “not a singular, unified philosophy or methodology” (p. 14) meaning that phenomenology is often intertwined with other philosophies and methodologies.

A case study is a descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory analysis of a person, group, or event. Thomas (2011) offers the following definition of case study:

Case studies are the analysis of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more method. The

case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytic frame—an *object*—within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates (p. 511).

Stake (1995) stressed the benefits of qualitative case study methodology arise from its emphasis on the uniqueness of each case, and the educator’s subjective experience with that case.

Phenomenology and case study work well together because of their shared focus on examining the unique experiences of, in the case of this study, educators, relative to the “essence” of, again, in this case, the particular phenomenon of student engagement.

Phenomenological case study enables the determination of how people are connected meaningfully with and through the phenomena (Vagle, 2014). Phenomenological case study results in a thick description of the essence of the phenomenon so that readers of this study have a strong sense of how to “understand what it is like to have experienced that particular phenomenon” (Vagle, 2014, p. 27). Phenomenology and case study were particularly appropriate for this study as they enabled the researcher to understand how student engagement, as a real-life phenomenon, was experienced by teachers in elementary classrooms and how it impacted their pedagogical decision making.

Filling the Gap

The preceding review of the literature illuminated the often complex, multi-faceted concept of student engagement. This complexity challenges researchers and practitioners alike. At the onset, it may not be readily clear which framework would lend itself as a match to how teachers experience student engagement in their classrooms, but it is important to understand that student engagement is critical to improving student achievement (Reschly & Christenson, 2012).

There are many things we know about student engagement from a data perspective. We know that engagement is a necessary condition for students to learn (Appleton et al., 2008; Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredericks et al., 2004). We know that engagement is a direct pathway to cumulative learning and long-term achievement (Bundick, Quaglia, Corso, & Haywood, 2014). We know that student engagement shapes students' everyday experiences, both psychologically and socially (Wang & Eccles, 2013). We know that the emotional climate of the classroom impacts student engagement (Patrick et al., 2007). We know that student engagement contributes to academic resilience and helps develop academic behaviors that last throughout a student's educational career (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

If we look toward the unknown, we do not know much about how teacher experience student engagement and, specifically, what pedagogical decisions they make when they do experience the phenomenon. What is missing is a broader understanding of how teachers make these (often) in-the-moment decisions about student engagement in their own classrooms during teaching, and how those decisions impact continued student engagement and learning. What is missing is research on teachers' lived experience of student engagement in their classrooms, especially in classrooms with a majority of minority group students. What is the meaning, structure, and essence of teachers' lived experience of student engagement in an elementary classroom? How do elementary teachers use the lived experience of student engagement to make pedagogical decision in order to improve student performance? By using a phenomenological case study method, this study provides a new approach to understanding student engagement from a teachers' perspective and, therefore, helps clarify its definition and the broader understanding of the phenomenon through descriptive analysis.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the study as a whole. Chapter 2 provided a review of research in the field of student engagement. The different types of student engagement were explored as well as other contextual factors that affect student engagement. Chapter 2 also addressed a gap in the research and provided a rationale for why this phenomenological case study was warranted. Chapter 3 details the methodological approach and design of the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of these case studies, which are analyzed in Chapter 5.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

Chapter 1 provided a rationale for this phenomenological case study of how teachers experience student engagement and how that engagement influences the pedagogical decisions these teachers make in their classrooms. Chapter 2 provided a review of research and theory in the field of student engagement. The gaps that emerged from within the existing body of research articulated the need for this study.

This chapter details the methodological approach and design of this study. This study was conceptualized as a phenomenological case study aimed at understanding student engagement as a phenomenon, specifically in a way would help practitioners, primarily elementary classroom teachers, improve students' academic performance. The significance of the topic is discussed herein, followed by a restatement of the research questions and the purpose of this study. Next, the overall approach and step-by-step methodology of this study is laid out, followed by ethical considerations. Chapter 4 includes an analysis of the study results. Chapter 5 analyzes the results and provides recommendations for future research.

Restatement of Purpose

The literature is replete with research that investigates student engagement. Much of this research has been quantitative in nature, primarily focused on the analysis of questionnaires, surveys, and numerical data (Frederick et al., 2004). Quantitative research, however, does not lend to developing a nuanced understanding of how teachers experience and define the essence of student engagement as a phenomenon. Qualitative methodology allows a broad approach to help better understand student engagement, in an authentic and natural context, through participants' own words. Teachers have a momentous effect on how students learn in

classrooms each day (Patrick, 1998), thus it is important to understand student engagement and how it impacts teachers' decision making from teachers' points-of-view, a perspective that is missing from the literature.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of student engagement as it manifested in elementary classrooms. Using phenomenological case study, this study explored how seven teachers experienced student engagement in their classrooms and, as a result, how teachers' pedagogical decision making was impacted.

Restatement of the Research Questions

This phenomenological case study was guided by one main question and one ancillary research question.

Main Research Question: What is the meaning, structure, and essence of teachers' lived experience of student engagement in an elementary classroom?

Ancillary Research Question: How do elementary teachers use the lived experience of student engagement to make future pedagogical decisions?

The answers to these questions identified how teachers experienced students' engagement in their classrooms through students' actions, responses, feedback during instructional activities, and in a multitude of other ways. In addition, this study explored how teachers made pedagogical decisions once they had experienced the phenomenon of student engagement in their classrooms.

Approach to the Study

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological case study approach to data collection and analysis. The intent of this study was to understand the phenomena of student engagement (not the cause of it) as it manifested in elementary classrooms and to understand

how teachers made pedagogical decisions based on their experiences with students being engaged in their classrooms.

Phenomenology differs from many qualitative approaches in how it focuses on the collective understandings of groups and does not make claims about the individual participants. It does not attempt to assert that participants hold specific conceptions, but gathers evidence to illustrate the range of conceptions present within the population under study. Phenomenology is not primarily concerned with explaining the causes of phenomena but attempts, instead, to describe how phenomena are experienced firsthand of the everyday world by those impacted by them (Vagle, 2014).

With that in mind, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) extends a simple phenomenological description by offering insights into how a given person in a given context, in the case of this study, elementary teachers in elementary classrooms, makes sense of the particular phenomenon (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton 2008).

IPA is grounded in and informed by three positions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). Phenomenology (as described above) focuses on developing and describing the essences of individuals' experiences but does not attempt to analyze those descriptions (Creswell, 2013). Hermeneutics describes an interpretive method that explores the role of language, questioning, and human conversation while trying to understand a specific phenomenon (Smith et al., 2013). Idiography refers to a richly detailed and unique representation of words and actions that describe the phenomenon as experienced by humans (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

IPA is inductive in its scope, so broad research questions, like the ones used in this study, are ideal and allow for the emergence of unanticipated themes. In addition, researchers using

IPA must be open to adjust their ideas as well as receptive to interpretations of data based on participants' responses instead of solely on their own beliefs.

This study collected the experiences and understandings from seven participants through individual interviews, group interviews, and descriptive writing. After a cross-case analysis was undertaken, a narrative of “the essence that all persons experience about a phenomenon” (Creswell, Hanson, Clark-Plano, & Morales, 2007, p. 239) emerged. This approach is supported by case study, which focuses on the detailed description of the case within specific, contextual conditions (Yin, 2003). Because the contextual conditions are important to the phenomenon of student engagement within a bounded system of an elementary school (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Voelkl, 2012), case study method supported the intent of this study as well (Creswell et al., 2007; Yin, 2003).

Phenomenological case study also aligned with my style as a researcher and writer by supporting “the researcher’s comfort levels with structure, writing in a more literary or scientific way and the final written ‘product’ that the design type produces” (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 239). As a result, this combination of phenomenology and case study provided a new, analytical approach to an area of research where little, field-wide consensus has emerged about how teachers have experienced the phenomenon of student engagement in their classrooms and how it has impacted their pedagogical decision making.

Other Methodological Approaches

Ethnography was a research method I considered for this study. Ethnographers attempt to understand a perspective from within a group by becoming immersed in the group. By observing and note-taking over time, ethnographers intend to develop a picture the collective culture of the group (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). While this type of research could help gain

awareness of how student engagement is experienced and understood, the true essence would be interpreted as “how we come to see what is real from a variety of perspectives” (Frank, 1999, p. 4). Although this could be useful as a resource for, in the case of elementary classrooms, campus-wide professional development, observing in classrooms from the emic (i.e. an insider’s point of view) perspective was not feasible for myself, the researcher.

A second research method I considered for this study was portraiture. Developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), the portraiture approach listens *for* a story that is told with the researcher’s voice woven throughout (Hackmann, 2010). A limitation of this methodology is that it is often considered hard to replicate, primarily because of the researcher’s likely selective use of data in telling the story (English, 2000). Even though similar themes related to student engagement may emerge, the researcher’s bias often finds its way into the narrative. As with ethnography, the amount of classrooms observations necessary to investigate a particular phenomenon would make portraiture an unlikely methodology for myself, the researcher.

Role of Researcher

I was the sole researcher for this study and have created, implemented, and analyzed all components of it. As the sole researcher, I was responsible for the creation and selection of all data related materials (e.g., consent forms and interview protocols), conducting all participant interviews, the analysis of the resulting data, and was the custodian of that data. The safety and confidentiality of all research documents, including all transcripts and production materials, and participants’ anonymity was my responsibility as well.

Qualitative research design should include researcher reflection on one’s identity and one’s sense of voice and perspectives, assumptions, and sensitivities (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). My true passion for the project can be determined from my own identity, values, and

experience. As a qualitative researcher, I remained true to myself and my social identity in portraying my enthusiastically sincere interest in this research.

Prior to ever conceptualizing this study, my teaching colleagues have no doubt about my love for the topic of engaging students in their learning. As a result of some of my first teaching experiences (elucidated in Chapter 1), I have spent a lot of time establishing structures in my classroom that engage students in every math and science lesson I teach. I have participated in nearly 20 days of non-school district training in student engagement, often at my own expense.

I have also been responsible for bringing some of that training to our school teaching staff, as well as for providing coaching sessions for teachers to give in-the-moment feedback on how they engage students. More specifically, during my time as a Learning Strategist, I worked with teachers to engage students in their learning on many occasions. I led staff development sessions and grade level meetings where student engagement was a primary topic. I have coached teachers in all grade levels to support their implementation of student engagement in classrooms, helping them reflect on their practice and make substantive changes in pedagogy.

The 2015-2016 school year was my first year teaching at the particular school from which this study drew participants. Initially, I was not certain that I could rely upon the reputation, relative to this study focus, described above with my new colleagues. Accordingly, I was able to position myself as a part of the professional community in the school and from there, quickly established myself as a “new insider” who supports teachers’ instruction. An advantage to being new was that teachers may have been more forthcoming in their conversations about their instruction with me precisely because they do not know of my extensive experience with or passion for student engagement.

According to Pine (2009), each school has an underground set of norms, beliefs, traditions, and rituals, often defined as its culture. Just as these attributes develop over time, they are subject to modification by members of the group and, as a result, can be critical factors with impacts on design and inquiry. “To the extent that it provides a clear purpose for the school, culture becomes the cohesion that bonds the school together as it goes about its mission” (Pine, 2009, p. 23). Yet, culture can be a counterproductive obstacle to success. My culture as a researcher with an insider role, however new it was, as well as my participants’ cultures, and the school culture from which I drew the participants, was constantly acknowledged; even when awareness of various aspects of that culture may lie at the unconscious level for me, I frequently reminded myself that it was there, impacting the study in some way.

This type of self-examination of my own experiences, called “bracketing” in the literature, helped me gain clarity through conscious examination of my own preconceptions throughout this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This reflective point of entry into research also supported how I approached interviews and the lens through which I viewed or interpreted data from participants by encouraging me to question my assumptions on an on-going basis, rather than simply by acknowledging that bias exists and then moving forward in the research without meaningfully considering that bias again. In this way, my identity, values, experience, enthusiasm, love, passion, closeness, and potential for frustration, in sum my biases, became research tools (Copp, 2008).

Methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Case Study Model

This section describes the methodology implemented in this study. Each stage of the process is described including a description of the research setting, how sampling was

undertaken to identify and, ultimately, select participants, participants' descriptions, the research study timeline, and data collection and analysis procedures.

Setting

This study drew teacher participants from the elementary school in which the researcher is also a teacher. The school is located in a large, urban school district in the Southwest United States. In the 2014-2015 school year, student demographics were as follows: 68.6% Hispanic, 13.7% Black, 11.62 White, 4.13% Two Races, and 1.23% Pacific Islander (Nevada Annual Reports of Accountability, n.d.). While no specific student demographic data for the 2015-2016 school year was available, there is little reason to believe it would have been significantly different than the prior year. According to school documents (personal communication, October 1, 2015), 798 students were enrolled at the school during the 2015-2016 school year and 87.98% of student population received free or reduced lunch. Although the students who attend the school were not participants in this study, the demographic make-up of the school proves important because the majority of research conducted on student engagement has focused on students who represent the "majority" (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). The teacher participants in this study primarily teach students of color, making the results of this study even more significant as their students, once called "minority groups", begin to emerge as the majority across the United States.

Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment

In this study, convenience sampling was used to select participants, primarily because of their convenient accessibility to the researcher (Crossman, 2014). A sampling of primary (grades K-2) and intermediate (grades 3-5) was undertaken specifically to identify a diverse and

varied group of participants from whom detailed descriptions student engagement could emerge, leading to a robust analysis of the phenomenon.

Sampling began during a school-wide faculty meeting at the researcher's school, where potential participants were informed of the purpose of the research study and their potential role within it (i.e. providing data through surveys, interviews, and other-data gathering activities) (see Appendix A). While the initial goal was to have 10 participants consent to this study, if more than 10 participants showed interest, participants were to be chosen based on description of student engagement and the extent to which they student engagement was present in their classrooms. Ten participants volunteered to participate in this study and provided their consent in writing (see Appendix B).

Teachers then completed a preliminary survey (via SurveyMonkey) (see Appendix C). All 10 participants were chosen to participate in the study, however, only seven of those selected were able to complete all components of the research study. Three of the ten participants that consented to the study were not included in any further data collection because they were unable or unwilling to complete the various components of the research process (approximately 10 hours).

Participants

Seven of this study's participants held state-certified teaching credentials and had the appropriate post-secondary degree to be considered "highly qualified" as defined by the U.S. Department of Education and the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Several of the participants also held master's degrees and specialty certifications within their chosen areas (e.g. TESL, technology, administration, etc.). These teacher participants also met the criteria put forth by Vagle (2014) as "able to provide a thorough and rich description of the phenomenon" (p. 128).

Additionally, seven participants was ideal for this study because it is a reasonable number from which to “develop a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals” (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007, p. 252). A more detailed description of this study’s participants is provided in Chapter 4.

Timeline

In order to secure enough data to ably answer the research questions of this study, a time line and data collection process was followed. Table 1 displays the timeline outlines the data collection steps used to guide this research from beginning to end.

Table 1.

Data Collection Timeline

Task	Time
Informed Consent, Preliminary Interview, & Sample Selection	December 15-17, 2015
Initial Interviews	December 27, 2015 – January 26, 2016
Follow-up Interviews (as necessary)	January 26 – February 20, 2016
Group Interview	February 27, 2016
Follow-up Interviews (as necessary)	February 2016
LED protocol	February 28 – March 14, 2016
Analysis of Data	March 14 – June 30, 2016

Data Collection Procedures

In phenomenological research, data is collected from a group of people who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007), in this case, student engagement. This study used surveys, interviews, group interviews, and writing detailed descriptions of the phenomenon to help understand participants’ experiences with student engagement in order to develop a

worldview, assuming that a narrative capable of describing the shared experience and understanding would emerge (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Surveys. In qualitative research, a survey is the study of diversity (not distribution) in a population and is used as a means of exploring meanings and experiences, not the distributions of variables within a population (Creswell, 1998). Within phenomenological case study, the intent is to describe what all participants have in common as they experience the phenomenon across cases, therefore, collecting data from participants with a common experience helps develop a descriptive explanation of what all participants experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

In this study of student engagement, each participant completed a preliminary survey, individually, to determine if each participant met the inclusion criteria for the study and, if so, how they would define their individual impressions of the phenomenon (see Appendix C). Participant responses were collected over a period of three days via SurveyMonkey. SurveyMonkey was chosen for this portion of the research because online platforms work well for the particular type of open-ended questions appropriate for the qualitative method chosen (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Online platforms also allow for “asynchronous conversations with participants” (James & Busher, 2006, p. 403).

Preliminary survey questions were designed to surface participants’ teaching experience (e.g. years teaching, experience with diverse student populations, grade levels taught, and teaching preferences), educational background (e.g. degrees or certifications held by participants), present teaching assignment, level of prior training any type of student engagement pedagogy (i.e. in pre-service education courses or otherwise), their definition of the phenomenon of student engagement (i.e. how is student engagement defined, what does it look like, how does

one know when students are engaged), as well as what types of activities engage students (see Appendix C).

Interviews. The seven participants were individually interviewed in person so they could elaborate on their answers from the preliminary survey. Each interview lasted from 20-40 minutes and was conducted at a mutually convenient time and location. Although each interview started with a protocol in place (see Appendix D), prepared questions were only used to provide an in-road to the phenomenon itself. Unstructured interview questions were used because they were “dialogic, open, conversational in nature” (Vagle, 2014 p. 78), and, as a result, dictated the pathway for each participants’ interview. In phenomenology, it is not critical for interviews to be identical, rather phenomenological interviews serve as opportunities to learn something important about the phenomenon from each participant (Vagle, 2014). With unstructured interviews, however, it was still important to maintain a clear sense of the phenomenon under investigation and to be attentive to the participant and the phenomenon throughout the duration of the interview (Vagle, 2014).

Phenomenological interviewing rests on the assumption that there is “structure and essence to share experiences that can be narrated” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 148) and is intended to enable interpretation of the meaning of a phenomenon that multiple participants share. These interviews focused on the lived experiences that events had for individuals, with the assumption that these experiences engendered meanings that guided the pedagogical decisions they made as they continued to teach.

Group Interview. Each of the seven participants participated in a group interview towards the end of the research cycle (see Table 1) at a mutually convenient time and place. Although a protocol for questioning was in place (see Appendix E), the responses from the

participants guided the trajectory of the interview and led to a deeper understanding of their shared experience with the phenomenon and how those experiences help develop their own worldview. Shared experiences make group interviews equally important for seeking understanding of the common phenomenon as well as for helping the researcher create a supportive environment where each participant feels comfortable with thoughtful discussion and expression of various, including dissenting, points of view (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Although the participants' views of the student engagement phenomenon were individually constructed, in listening to the attitudes, beliefs, and ideas of other participants, they continued to process and refine their own understandings and beliefs. Group interviews also enabled participants' opportunities to reflect on their teaching in a way that added value to this research that could not be anticipated, as well as holistically to their school culture. These interviews also enabled participants to develop social and professional ties.

Other. Writing, of any kind, is another useful way to gather phenomenological data. Each participant in this study was asked to complete a Lived Experience Description (LED) protocol (Vagle, 2014). The LED required participants to describe, in rich detail, a specific time when they recognized students being engaged in their learning. Rich detail included event chronology, descriptions of what was seen, said, and heard, as well as what the participant felt and thought during the event. Participants were asked to submit their writing via e-mail. Such an LED helped capture the complexities of the phenomenon of student engagement, and helped the researcher to further understand participant perceptions of the lived experience of the phenomenon, as well as, perhaps, how to perpetuate the phenomenon moving forward.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

When analyzing phenomenological data, some guidance is good, but too much may be limiting. The analysis of this research followed the whole-part-whole guidance process put forth by Vagle (2014).

In short, the whole-part-whole analysis methods stem from the idea that we must always think about the focal meanings (e.g., moments) in relation to the whole (e.g., broader context) from which they are situated—and once we begin to remove parts from one context and put them in dialogue with other parts, we end up creating new analytic wholes that have particular meanings in relation to the phenomenon” (p. 97).

The first step in this process was to read the entire body of data collected in order to become attuned to or, perhaps, reacquainted with the data. Then a line-by-line reading was executed that involved careful note-taking and marking of excerpts that appeared to have initial meaning. Throughout this line-by-line reading, I referred back to my own journaling (mentioned in my discussion of strategies for managing my own bias in the research) to check my own presuppositional thinking about the phenomenon. Although it may not have been feasible to put those ideas and biases completely aside, it was important to revisit how they might have been influencing my analysis. During this first line-by-line read, I was able to craft follow-up questions for each participant that helped me clarify the meaning and intent within their initial interview responses. While developing these follow-up questions, it was critical to consider what might have been important to ask in order for participants to further describe, interpret, or represent their experience relative to the phenomenon.

The next step in the whole-part-whole guidance process was a second line-by-line reading that involved further articulation of meanings of the phenomenon from the participants, based on the questions asked and any notes I made on the answers they provided.

The final step of the whole-part-whole data analysis guidance process was subsequent readings of the data to discover the manifestations of student engagement (the phenomenon). These manifestations fell into categories or themes that sometimes required additional questioning.

When it comes to analysis, phenomenological researchers engage in active and sustained reflection as they “dwell” with the data and interrogate it, for example asking: “If a person has said this, what does this suggest of their experience in of the world?” Some researchers prefer to use open, spontaneous, fluid dialogue in a group context rather than adhering to any explicit procedures. Whichever the approach, researchers are involved in an extreme form of care that savors the situations described in a slow, meditative way and attends to, even magnifies all the details (Wertz, 2005, p. 172).

Phenomenology is often viewed as more craft than method because it involves active engagement in reshaping our understanding of the phenomenon instead following a strict, prescribed, routine (Vagle, 2014). In phenomenology, all of the participants’ responses, their descriptions and interpretations of student engagement, emerge into a cohesive understanding of the phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed all guidelines of the Research Protocol Proposal form that was submitted to and approved by the university’s Instructional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix F). None of the research associated with this study was collected prior to the IRB’s approval.

Participants individually received and signed a letter of informed consent to voluntarily participate in the research study.

Through the informed consent process, each participant was notified of the privacy and confidentiality measures of the research study. Pseudonyms were chosen by the researcher in order to avoid participants self-selecting names that could potentially identify themselves (e.g., family member names). Because the setting of this research study was bound within a single elementary school campus, participants may have known the names of other participants' family members, thereby potentially compromising anonymity (Allen & Wiles, 2015). Pseudonyms for each participant were assigned with careful consideration given to aligning pseudonyms with the ethnicity and gender of each participant, to the extent that their own name reflected their ethnicity and gender. Pseudonyms were also selected in such a way that characteristics or features (e.g. sex, race, or other identity), to the greatest extent possible, mentioned in the data or research findings would not lead to the identification of any participant, or the location of the school (i.e. school name or district) where the participants teach. Participants were informed that because of the group interviews required by this study, it was possible that their identity, despite the ethic of confidentiality to which all participants were asked to adhere, could be revealed to other participants. Participants were informed that there would be minimal risks associated with their involvement (e.g. a feeling of discomfort when answering questions), and that their identities would be protected to the greatest degree possible.

Participants were told of direct benefits they may experience as a result of their participation, including insights about their own teaching that may, after critical reflection, improve their teaching practice. Participants were also informed that their participation was

unrelated to their employment as a teacher and that they could excuse themselves from participation in the study at any time, without fear of consequence (see Appendix B).

Additionally, each participant was notified that all research data (i.e. surveys, notes, recordings, and transcriptions) would be kept on a locked, password-protected, Wi-Fi-disabled-computer or word processing program only accessible to the researcher and would be deleted after a period of five years. Finally, participants were not offered compensation to participate in the study in order to avoid coercion and in accordance with IRB directives (see Appendices B & F).

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the study, and Chapter 2 reviewed existing literature deemed pertinent to the study. This chapter described the specific approach used for this study, including a brief overview of phenomenological case study method and the role of the researcher. The methodology for this study was also described as were related ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this phenomenological case study. Chapter 5 provides an analysis and discussion of those findings.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Introduction

Chapter 1 provided an introduction and a rationale for this study of how teachers experienced student engagement in their classrooms and how it impacted their pedagogical decision making. Chapter 2 reviewed the empirical research in the field of student engagement, bringing to light that most research has focused on the degree to which students think, feel, and act engaged in learning (Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007), instead of how that engagement impacts pedagogical decision making. As a result of this gap in the literature, Chapter 3 outlined the methodological approach taken by this study, aimed at developing a better understanding of how teachers make sense of the student engagement phenomenon.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the phenomenological case study. Each of the seven research participants' backgrounds are presented, followed by their definitions of student engagement and their lived experience descriptions. Chapter 5 analyzes the findings of this study.

Phenomenological Case Study Reporting

This study employed a phenomenological approach to “explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of the individual lived experience” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 19). Through this type of methodology, how participants perceive and interpret the phenomenon assumes, through common experiences with the phenomenon, that the specific *essence* of the experience is shared among participants (Patton, 2002). In this chapter, these experiences are presented as unique expressions through case study. The original data was obtained through a specific sequence (i.e., initial interview, follow-up interviews, LED protocol, group interview), but it is framed and

reported in a way that is processual of “being, becoming, and knowing” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 20) the phenomenon.

Phenomenological interviewing rests on the assumption “the structure and essence of shared experiences can be narrated” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 148). The purpose of this type of interviewing was to describe the meaning of a phenomenon through the experience of the study participants and, therefore, required that the interviewer have a reflexive stance (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As reported in Chapter 3, each of the seven interviews in this study started with a protocol (see Appendix B), but prepared questions were only used to provide an in-road to the phenomenon itself. Knowing that interviews in this type of study must be dialogic and conversational in nature (Vagle, 2014), interview questions varied by participant and their willingness to communicate their experiences with the researcher. This type of variation was ideal because asking the same questions is not desirable when the intention was to find out as much as possible about the lived meanings of the phenomenon of student engagement from the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Vagle, 2014).

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of student engagement as it manifested in seven elementary classrooms. This study also explored how teachers made pedagogical decisions once they had experienced the phenomenon of student engagement in their classrooms. This study lends a new approach to understanding student engagement as a phenomenon, specifically how student engagement is experienced by teachers.

The Participants’ Individual Contributions

This study included a total of seven participants, chosen because each was a classroom teacher, had access to the student engagement phenomenon via their instructional time with

students, and would be able, therefore, to provide a detailed and rich description of that phenomenon. The pseudonyms assigned to the participants were Elizabeth, Mary, Sara, Patrice, Emma, Alicen, and Anna. In order to establish a sense of universalism and to recognize that even shared experiences can potentially be understood differently regardless of similar contexts (Hammer, 2011), Table 2 notes the demographic information of the participants. These demographic descriptions, and the continuation of those descriptions in the individual participant portraits below, may provide the opportunity to determine how the findings of this research can be generalized, compared, and replicated (Beins, 2009).

Table 2.

Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Highest College Degree	Years Teaching
Elizabeth	37	Female	White	Bachelor's degree	5
Mary	44	Female	White	Master's degree	3
Sara	34	Female	White	Bachelor's degree	11
Patrice	31	Female	Hispanic	Master's degree	9
Emma	28	Female	White	Bachelor's degree	4
Alicen	58	Female	White	Master's degree	20+
Anna	35	Female	African-American	Master's degree	8

Elizabeth

Elizabeth has a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education. During her teaching career, she has taught at several different grade levels, but presently teaches fifth grade English language arts in a departmentalized model. At the time of our interview, she was working with over 60 students each day during her fifth year of teaching. Elizabeth expressed that she didn't feel she had enough experience to determine which grade level she preferred teaching most.

Elizabeth described her undergraduate teacher training as focused on differentiated instruction (i.e., providing lessons to students based on their ability level in order to help them achieve their learning outcome). The first time Elizabeth received any training on cooperative learning or student engagement was after she had become a classroom teacher.

Personal definition of student engagement. Elizabeth defined student engagement as a time when students are motivated and excited about what they are learning. Motivation can be defined as “any force that energizes and directs behavior” (Reeve, 2012, p. 150), therefore, student motivation and the learning environment affect one another, namely as sources of motivation are received and internalized from the learning environment. Elizabeth believes curiosity and interest keep students focused when they are genuinely engaged and vested in their education. She added that student engagement can look like “organized chaos” (e.g., students working with other students collaborating, having discussions, debating, learning from and teaching each other, etc.) or can occur in silence (e.g., where students are focused on their work and are taking ownership of their learning).

Students are engaged when they pay attention, ask questions, and participate. During group activities, students are interacting with each other and having meaningful conversations about what they are learning. Activities that are interactive, especially when they work with partners, keeps students engaged.

Elizabeth tries to put herself in her students’ shoes by thinking “What would I be interested in or care about?”. Elizabeth admitted that this becomes a bit easier after she has gotten to know her students, but realizes that as she meets new groups of students, what interests them often changes from year to year.

Lived experience description. Elizabeth described a lesson that began as an exploration of how humans impact the earth as a time when her students were especially engaged via the movie *WALL-E* (Collins & Stanton, 2008). This movie is a computer-animated science-fiction comedy film, released by Disney-Pixar, about a robot named WALL-E who is programmed to clean up a waste-covered Earth far in the future.

The lesson began by discussing what students already knew about pollution and the effect it has on the environment. I had students work in groups to brainstorm a list, and then we came together as a class and shared our ideas. We then watched the movie *WALL-E* (Collins & Stanton, 2008) and afterwards students shared their reactions to the movie. The students' next task was to build a WALL-E using only recyclable materials. I split the students into two teams, based on their academic and social skills levels. The students were told to bring in any materials that they thought they could use and worked with their teams to come up a blueprint. I was surprised by the complexity of the conversations they were having and that they were focused on the task at hand. They took on their own roles in the group and although they had occasional disagreements, they were able to figure out a solution on their own. Teams broke off into smaller groups to work on different parts of the WALL-E. They were collaborating as a whole, checking in to see where they were and giving input into each other's work. At the end of the project, the students shared with the whole class.

Overall, I was impressed and happy with the outcome of this lesson. Their understanding of what was expected of them and the results were above what I had expected. They took ownership of their work and were engaged throughout the lesson.

Several parts of this lesson create a classroom environment (or climate) where students were engaged in their learning. Incorporating technology and/or multimedia into classroom lessons often compels students to actively engage in their learning (Jensen, 2013). Additionally, Elizabeth believes that increasing student achievement is often a result of social interaction amongst students. According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977), human learning and behavior occur in social environments. Students were also given significant control over the trajectory of their projects (e.g., bringing in their own materials, determining their group processes, creating their own blueprints, etc.). This sense of autonomy is a critical part of basic needs theory described by Deci & Ryan (1985). Autonomy (i.e., experiencing behavior endorsed by the inner self of choice over actions), along with competence (i.e., the desire to be effective) and relatedness (i.e., close and secure relations with others), is essential to psychological well-being. This lesson provided novelty, which students used to satisfy those basic needs (Reeve, 2012).

Impact on decision making. Elizabeth admits that engaging students is hard. She says, “It’s the worst feeling...when you’re teaching and you can hear crickets...so I have to think back in my head about how I can transform the lesson into something that will engage them.” When Elizabeth faces this situation, she reaches into what she calls her “bag of tricks”, thinks on the spot to change the direction of the lesson, and claims that sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. Elizabeth, however, tries to merge learning and fun, recognizing that there is a thin line between “functional fun” and “silly fun”, indicating that students eventually pick up on her cues for “structured fun”. Elizabeth believes that structured fun typically leads to students engaged in their learning. Positive comments and feedback from students, both to her and amongst themselves, lets Elizabeth know that students were engaged. Elizabeth says she feels a

sense of satisfaction when students are engaged in their learning and she tries to plan meaningful learning experiences for students to maintain that engagement. This type of monitoring and subsequent enhancement of students' engagement is an important skill for teachers, especially in the large, fluid, and diverse environments teachers face each day (Reeve, 2012).

Elizabeth believes that from those learning situations comes a socially cooperative spirit among students that she wants to replicate. By interacting with others, students learn skills, strategies, beliefs, norms, and attitudes from each other (Kagan, 2009; Schunk & Mullen, 2012). The development of these social skills within learning structures contributes to students' self-efficacy, or perceived capability for learning or performing at specific levels (Bandura, 1977). Elizabeth believes the development of social skills, specifically effective student interaction and the ability to think on the spot, contribute to a skill set necessary in the workplace.

Mary

Mary has a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education and a Master's degree in elementary mathematics. Mary has taught for three years and has only taught fourth grade. Presently, Mary teaches English language arts, and works with 52 fourth graders in a departmentalized model.

When asked to think back to her own elementary school experience and to describe what her teacher considered to be student engagement, Mary used the term "old school". "When I was in school, it was pretty much sit there, be quiet, and do your work. Do your paper, turn it in, then read. That was considered engagement." This is consistent with how Harris (2008) described student engagement during the 1970s and 1980s, with a specific emphasis on time-on task, participation, and compliance.

Mary described the amount of training she received in her undergraduate program related to student engagement or cooperative learning as virtually nil.

A majority of my understanding of student engagement came from trainings or courses I participated in after having entered the profession. I have had a bit of Kagan training on cooperative learning. I have also spent time studying writers' workshop and arts integration, and student engagement has been a part of those trainings.

Mary also considers collaboration with other teachers to be a significant part of her on-going development.

Personal definition of student engagement. Mary defined student engagement as “all students being involved in a particular activity or task”. This is consistent with the definition put forth by Wellborn (1991) that student engagement refers to the extent of a student's active involvement in a learning activity. She continued to describe student engagement as students being involved in the lesson and participating with others. According to Mary, when students are focused on the task, answering questions, and having “proper discussions”, they are engaged. She defined “proper discussions” as on-topic conversations amongst students, focused on the learning task, including the use of terminology (i.e. academic vocabulary) associated with the topic.

Mary offered that students tend to be engaged by hands-on activities that require the use of a variety of materials, including the integrations of arts in non-typical ways. Mary also described students working in groups or with partners as typically being engaged. Both of these statements are supported by Kagan (2009) and Reeve (2012) who write that the brain craves novelty. “Our brains become more alert and focused in the face of novel stimuli. A novel stimulus alerts the attention system and produces greater retention” (Kagan, 2009, p. 4.12).

Lived experience description. In Mary’s definition of student engagement, “students being involved in a particular activity or task”, the way in which students may (or may not) be involved is vague. The lived experience description below helps focus her definition and indicates that students are engaged (i.e., involved) when working with and talking with other students.

I noticed students being engaged in their learning during a poetry lesson on imagery, specifically how imagery was used to help create a picture in the mind of the reader. After the students were done reading, we discussed (as a class) the words or phrases that helped them visualize what the author was saying. The next step in the lesson involved table groups (4 students per group) working together to come up with one noun and three adjectives (e.g., big blue fast car) to share with the rest of the class. I determined that students were engaged because they were participating together and able to come up with phrases. The students who were still struggling with the concept were being helped by teammates who understood the lesson, while I assessed for understanding.

The final step in the lesson was to have students look at a poem and write down phrases from that poem that created imagery independently. Many students were not engaged, so I redirected students’ attention to me, reviewed the term, and modeled with some good examples. Then I had students split into a group of experts and a group of non-experts. The non-experts chose an expert partner. The expert then helped to “teach” the other student the lesson in their own way by discussing how the words worked together to create an image.

The experts were engaged because they felt important and the non-expert was engaged because they had the choice of who they were working with. After about five

minutes, students came back together and chose a different partner to help them repeat the same activity. After they had time with the other partner, we came back together as a whole class and discussed the lesson and the strategies we used, such as drawing a picture of the words or rereading the text. Most students stayed engaged because both experts and non-experts wanted to share what they taught or learned.

Based on Mary's lived experience description, when students were asked to work independently, many (about half of the class) seemed unable to do so. This could be a result of some students not understanding the content, not being able to demonstrate understanding without the support of a partner, not being willing to work independently, or a combination of the three. Regardless, teachers must ensure that students have time to practice skills independently (Hill & Flynn, 2006).

Skinner & Pitzer (2012) write that students show active engagement in some situations while in others they may not, meaning that not all of a students' basic needs are being met. Basic needs theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) indicates that optimal functioning is based on the presence of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the case Mary presented above, it appears that it was some students' lack of competence (i.e., effective mastering of learning) that prohibited them from successful independent work, not lack of engagement. The changes she made during the tack of her lesson were a result of students' lack of understanding.

Impact on decision making. When making pedagogical decisions, Mary said that she always does so with the intention of student engagement, but how that explicitly happens depends on the engagement strategy she has in mind. If she is planning an activity that involves a gallery walk or carousel (i.e., when students are up and moving from place to place observing the work or presentations of others), the activity is specifically recorded in her plans. At other

times, she says that strategies to help with engagement pop into her head and she works it in to her teaching unplanned and mentally unrehearsed. Mary describes her students as sometimes having a “deer in the headlights” look (i.e. she believes this to be a sign of low engagement) and that she needs to provide students with the opportunity to talk with each other or move around the room in structured way. These (often unplanned) activities help Mary get her students back on track in their learning.

Sara

Sara has a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education, has been teaching for 11 years, all with Title I, low socio-economic populations. At the time of the interview, Sara was teaching fourth grade, a grade she prefers over other grades she has taught because of the independent nature of her students.

Sara described her own experience in elementary school as unengaged. She could not recall any specific instances when she was particularly engaged, and mentioned that students were expected to do their work, turn it in, and get a good grade. She recalled this time in her life as being worksheet-driven, without the opportunity to talk or communicate with her peers outside of lunch and recess. Like many of the other participants in this study, Sara did not learn much about student engagement until she had already been teaching several years. Her school did provide some Kagan cooperative learning training and she then began to slowly implement structures into her daily lessons. She does admit that intermittent training over the last several years has helped her implementation.

Personal definition of student engagement. Sara defined student engagement as “students invested in what they are learning and they cannot wait to keep working on it, learning more, and sharing with others what they have learned.” According to Sara, students who are

engaged in their learning are focused and passionate about what they are working on and are eager to share what they have learned with others. More specifically, Sara says “If you are able to walk out of the room and your students continue, willingly, working and feel that time has flown by, they are engaged.” Such an energized focus and are so completely immersed in an activity, indicates that a state of flow has been reached (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When flow and student engagement are considered together, concentration, interest, and enjoyment of a task are rewarding for students, often times to the point where students want to replicate flow experiences (Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Shernoff et al., 2003).

Lived experience description. In the lived experience described below, students demonstrate a striking combination of challenge and the skills needed to meet those challenges, which is a symbiotic relationship often attributed to flow theory (Shernoff et al., 2003). When students perceive their performance to be pleasurable and successful, and the task worth doing for its own sake, the experience of being able to function at his or her capacity is rewarding in and of itself (Deci, 1975; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

A specific time I recognized students being engaged in their learning was during my intervention group. I work with the low-level reading group, and they need consistent practice with accuracy, fluency, and expression. We had been doing some different activities to help improve all three of these areas, but I was not seeing as much improvement in their expression.

I was thinking of how to help students improve in these areas, and the *Piggie & Elephant* books (Willems, 1995-2015), crossed my mind. These books are very simple, but when read aloud, provide great opportunities for expression or expressive reading. I checked out as many books from the series as I could find, and gave students the choice

about which book they could work with. Using one of the books, I modeled reading with expression, almost to the point of exaggeration. Next, each student chose a book and practiced reading with similar expression. Even though the books were fairly simple, I wanted them to work on their expression, not struggle with the vocabulary used in the book.

After a couple of sessions (only 40 minutes each) of practicing and rehearsing, I asked for volunteers to read their book to the class, demonstrating their best expression. While students were reading to the group, I noticed that the expressions I saw on the faces of the students who were listening were happy and excited. I knew they were engaged because they did not want to stop.

I knew when I saw the excitement on their faces that I needed to keep the momentum going. In order to do so, I increased the complexity of the text a little and had students work partners. I used the *Pigeon* books (Willems, 1997-2015) and gave each student a part to read, changing it up a bit. The students loved this activity, and even though there was not a specific structure that I used, there was still a great deal of student interaction, both amongst themselves and with the text.

The description of students' engagement in this reading activity demonstrates the balance of challenge and skill, and shows that issuing appropriate challenges and opportunities for practice may be an opportune way to engage students (Shernoff et al., 2003). One of the important aspects of flow theory is creating tasks that are demanding, while also being enjoyable and satisfying (Shernoff et al., 2003). Especially for students who are behind in reading (in this case), the apparent intrinsic reward of competence in (i.e., success in reading fluently) helps develop greater levels of skill (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Impact on decision making. Sara described her method of pedagogical decision making to be “a rough outline subject to being tossed out the window.” Sara proclaimed herself to be a teachable moment person, knowing that lessons can take some dramatic, unplanned turns. She said that as her teaching experience has increased, her comfort level with making in-the-moment changes to engage students, when necessary, has improved. She demonstrated this in her description when she had some success with students being engaged and then adapted what she was going to do next to keep the engagement level high.

Patrice

Patrice has a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master’s degree in elementary education. Throughout her career, Patrice has taught third and fourth grade students in an at-risk school. She presently teaches third grade and has 25 students. Patrice admits that, of the two grade levels she has taught, she prefers third grade primarily because of her enjoyment of the age of the students and the curriculum of the grade level. She believes that third grade is a pivotal age for reading, and that students who leave third grade below grade level are likely to remain below their grade-level peers in later grades.

When asked to reflect on her own experience in school, Patrice said that “being engaged meant completing and turning in your work in a timely manner. Being engaged was defined as being on task”. She continued to explain that students were to do as they were told and not talk to their neighbors or anyone else. “I do remember working in small groups, but that work or experience was led by worksheets [not by teammates or the teacher]. Student engagement had a totally different definition then compared to what I want to see for my students now.”

Patrice recalled that throughout her teacher education training, “all classes focused on content rather than strategies that supported content area instruction.” While there were

occasional discussions about the importance of group work and group activities, Patrice described those conversations as never using the word *engagement*. Her university coursework focused on students creating a product (e.g., unit planning) or participating in an activity as a larger group. After entering the profession, Patrice's school provided some initial Kagan training that "clearly delineated the difference between group work and cooperative work." Looking back, Patrice is now particularly appreciative of learning about mutual interdependence (i.e., task completion requires working with other students) within learning activities. Patrice summed up her experience in a sentence: "Personally, Kagan structures have changed the way I view planning, standards, and my overall pedagogical perspective".

Personal definition of student engagement. Patrice defined student engagement as something that is created when students are "presented with academic and non-academic activities that enable them to equally participate within a group." Patrice determined that such activities are typically of high interest to students, so they are genuinely motivated to be successful. "Generally defined, activities that make students happy and excited to learn."

Patrice described student engagement as groups of two or four students working together with each having a task or responsibility. She added that when student engagement is present, students are positively reinforcing each other. According to Patrice, student engagement can be academic in nature, but in its best form "gives students the opportunity to build on their social skills interactions." Patrice stated that students who are engaged are talking and smiling, but upon more careful inspection, engaged student are able to solidly and specifically answer the question "What are you working on?". Engaging activities also "motivate students to the point where they feel a sense of responsibility within the activity while, at the same time, think 'I

matter””. Building a student’s sense of belonging in the classroom supports greater student engagement (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009).

Lived experience description. In the lived experience described by Patrice, her students were working on identifying character traits using the AllWrite Consensus (Kagan, 2009) structure. Specifically, this structure required each student to brainstorm ideas, one at a time within their teams, and when the team agreed that their answer was a correct possibility, each student wrote the idea on their own papers.

I remember teaching characterization and deciding to use an AllWrite Consensus (Kagan, 2009) structure in order to provide students an opportunity to brainstorm different character traits based on what characters say, do, and feel. I thought this would be a perfect activity for groups of four, as each component allowed students to actively think and build on what others were thinking. We engaged in this activity for about 15 minutes.

During that time, I made sure to walk around to see what other students were writing. I immediately observed students reviewing what others had written in order to write something “new” or help develop another teammate’s thought. I watched as students signaled to each other when they were ready to go to the next idea, and it was clear that all students were aware they had a stake in the activity. There were no moments of students glaring across the room, disengaged, unfocused, or uninterested. It was great to see how students took responsibility for the activity, their thinking, and the importance of their participation for the sake of the team.

I could have simply given this assignment to be done independently, but why would I lose an opportunity to allow students to feel good about their contribution to their own learning and the learning of others?

The activity that Patrice has described above matched the definition of student engagement used in this study. The structure for learning within the activity engages students at the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive levels, primarily through positive interdependence (e.g., brainstorming with teammates requires each teammate's participation and/or a teammate's response could evoke a response from a different teammate), individual accountability (e.g., students were expected to perform for/in front of their teammates), equal participation (e.g., the numbers of turns were approximately equal), and simultaneous interaction (e.g., one person in each team was providing an idea at any one time, instead of one student in the entire classroom).

Impact on decision making. Patrice admitted that her experience with students being engaged as a result of using a Kagan structure(s) has impacted how she makes pedagogical decisions and how she handles impromptu moments within her classroom. Patrice asks herself, “what do I want students to learn, and how do I want them to share that information with others in their team or in the classroom?” For example, if a particular question has multiple possibilities for correct answers, such as comprehension questions for English language arts, Patrice says she would consider incorporating a structure like Fan-N-Pick (Kagan & Kagan, 2009) or AllWrite RoundRobin (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). If she wanted students to focus more on their thinking, metacognition, or mental processes to form their answers, such as for regrouping with subtraction in math, Patrice would consider using Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan, Kagan, & Kagan, 2016) or RallyCoach (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). If Patrice wanted students to engage in a standard where there may only be one correct answers, such as practicing their

multiplication facts, she would possibly incorporate a structure like Inside-Outside Circle or Showdown (Kagan & Kagan, 2009).

Patrice declared the most important process of her decision making to be thinking about which structured interaction works best for the standard she is teaching in a particular lesson and how does she want students to share their learning [or understanding] with others. Each of the thinking processes Patrice has described here connect the intended learning outcome with the learning structure's function (Kagan, 2009).

Structuring student interaction for high engagement takes practice, but Patrice added, "There is no greater joy than allowing students to take ownership of their learning and empowering them in a way that makes a great impact on them personally, socially, and academically." By structuring student engagement in a way that supports this type of growth, students' basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Emma

Emma has two Bachelor of Arts degrees, one in early childhood and one in elementary education and has only taught grades two, three, five in Title I schools. She presently teaches fifth grade and said she prefers this grade because of the curriculum, "I enjoy the engagement level and the depth of knowledge as it relates to rigor in this grade level." When asked to think back to her own experience as a student, Emma recalled student engagement to be more closely aligned with time-on-task. For example, "When I was a student, learning was all about getting to school on time, completing your work independently, and getting it turned in on time. No talking. No fooling around." During the 1990s, student engagement was often times used as a strategy to gain compliance from or control of a group of students, typically measured by analyzing students' time-on-task (Harris, 2008).

Emma was not able to directly recall any particular experiences related to learning to engage students during her undergraduate training. Her training experience with engaging students mostly stemmed from recent years as a classroom teacher. Emma has participated in conference trainings focused on reading engagement and engaging multiple parts of the brain (e.g. International Reading Association, Whole Brain Teaching). She has also received some training on Kagan Cooperative Learning, again, provided by her school.

Personal definition of student engagement. Emma defined student engagement as “interest and participation in a task.” She defined *interest* as giving attention to or completing a task in order to learn more about it. When pressed to elaborate, Emma added that student engagement is “students actively involved in their learning.” This could include, but was not necessarily limited to, students asking questions, engaging in research, and taking ownership of their learning. Emma said she usually determines whether students are engaged by how they respond to a learning task and by assessing nonverbal cues through body language. Emma believes that engaged students show excitement, but still are able to focus and converse intelligently. She has found hands-on activities where students are manipulating materials, from simple cut and paste tasks to more complex science experiments, to be the most engaging.

Lived experience description. In the lived experience description by Emma, she used specific structures to review content from the previous week. RoundTable (Kagan & Kagan, 2009) is a cooperative learning structure where students take turns generating ideas onto a single list, which is passed around the table. Jot Thoughts is also a structure for brainstorming where teammates simultaneously write ideas on separate sheets of paper, announce the ideas to their teammates, and place the idea in the center of the table (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). Both RoundTable (Kagan & Kagan, 2009) and Jot Thoughts (Kagan & Kagan, 2009) help develop

mutual support between teammates as they build on the contributions of others, holding students who may not want to participate accountable for contributing (Kagan et al., 2016).

A specific time that I can recall really feeling like my students were engaged was during a poetry activity a couple of weeks ago. It was on a Monday, and we had started talking about poetry the week before, so I knew I needed to review some before we got started. I started the lesson with a Kagan teambuilding activity. I hadn't used the structure yet, and figured I would give them some practice [with the structure] before I used it with content. We used the structure RoundTable (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). I gave students the topic "What is your favorite animal?" The students enjoyed this and started to become competitive with the other groups. After a couple of practice rounds, I asked them to write down anything they could think of about poetry. By this time, they had the structure down well, were enthusiastic about the activity, and were able to generate some thoughtful responses. I felt like they had remembered quite a lot and were ready to move forward with the lesson.

I began the next part of the lesson with another Kagan activity. This time it was Jot Thoughts. I displayed the title of the poem "The Science Fair" and I instructed them to jot their thoughts on the topic of the poem based solely on its title. This was particularly timely as they had been working on science fair proposals and I knew they would be able to make connections with the topic. Next, we chorally read the poem. I made this decision for two reasons: (1) I wanted everyone engaged and reading, and (2) it supported their fluency and pausing when appropriate, another thing we had been working on. After reading, I gave the students two minutes to write down as many connections as they could make with the poem. Again, with the chosen poem, I

anticipated students would refresh their memory and thinking on extending reading by making connections. Finally, I used the structure StandUp-HandUp-PairUp (Kagan & Kagan, 2009) to have students find a partner quickly, and Timed Pair Share, where they were given 20 seconds each to share their connections.

Throughout the lesson, I monitored students closely and, overall, was pleased with their participation and engagement. The strategies I chose enabled me to monitor some of my shy students and their participation with their peers, and I felt like they were given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding without having to be in front of the entire class. I was also able to see and hear several students helping their teammates through coaching (i.e. showing, not telling). Because the students were constantly doing something (e.g. reading, writing, speaking, etc.), the pacing of lesson went smoothly.

Much like the lived experience description from Patrice, the engagement in this lesson matched the definition of student engagement of this study, specifically how behavior, emotional, and cognitive engagement was established by positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction. The tasks the students were asked to complete required working together while providing structured support, meaning that a gain for one student would be a benefit for the others. Each student was responsible for performing (i.e. responsible for demonstrating their contributions in some way, in this case, with either partners or teams) and each student was required to complete an approximately equal amount of the work. Simultaneous interaction was achieved during these activities because a high percentage of the students were active at the same time (i.e., anywhere from 25-100% of the class was engaged at any particular time in this example). Emma's description of this time in her

classroom demonstrates how student engagement is a result of structured social interaction between students.

Impact on decision making. Emma admitted to thinking about student engagement quite often while making pedagogical decisions. Engaging students is something she also thinks about during the lesson, evaluating how the lesson is going and often making decisions about impromptu changes. Typically, Emma tries to use a cooperative learning strategy in her introduction to the lesson, to help build background and to get students to think about what they are about to learn. Emma described this as “bringing what they already know up to the front of their memory.” She added, “I don’t always *see* a cooperative learning structure when I’m planning a lesson, but I always feel better about the outcome of the lesson, and the students’ learning, when I have used one.” Emma claimed to have greater success in her classroom in terms of participation, effort, and motivation, when she uses a cooperative learning structure than when she does not. This is supported by cooperative learning research, which states that when students are performing to their greatest potential and are experiencing psychological success, they are motivated to continue investing energy and effort in their learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999)

Alicen

Alicen has a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science and history, and she has a Master’s degree in educational leadership. As a teaching veteran of over 20 years, Alicen has taught all of the elementary grades and has served in leadership roles throughout her career. She currently works with 98 students each week in small groups (i.e. students working below grade level) as an elementary learning strategist. As is true with other participants in this study,

Alicen described her classroom experience as a child as very rigid and formal, and there was very little opportunity to work with other students.

Alicen admitted that her training in student engagement was, for the most part, self-acquired. A majority of her understanding of and experience with student engagement came from observing other teachers in their classrooms. Recently, she received some Kagan cooperative learning training, but had not received any follow-up or additional training to the introductory courses.

Personal definition of student engagement. Alicen defined student engagement as “students completely involved in their learning.” When asked to elaborate, she added that students who are engaged are working with other people and asking questions, as well as demonstrating a sense that what they’re learning is important. Alicen clarified that students tend to be engaged “when they have a little bit of freedom to learn in the style that works for them.” Alicen described engaged students as demonstrating a high level of interaction about what they are working on, oblivious to the adults who may be listening to their conversations mainly because they are so intent on their task. Engaged students, according to Alicen, buy in to what they are doing and are pulled into the activity, even if they are often reticent to do so. These descriptions are reminiscent of flow theory, which describes a person who is so fully immersed in an activity that they lose track of time because of their complete involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Alicen says, “I find that, no matter what the age, the students’ needs to be social often override any particular needs that I have that day (i.e., learning targets or goals).” In order to engage students, Alicen gives them the opportunity to talk, express themselves, and work together, believing that students can demonstrate their understanding as they work with other

students, all while developing social skills. Johnson & Johnson (1999) write that students who work cooperatively together improve social skills, gain self-worth, and form personal relationships that provide a basis for healthy social development.

Lived experience description. In her lived experience description, Alicen describes students' interaction through Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan et al., 2016), a cooperative learning structure where students take turns playing the role of sage and scribe. The sage orally instructs the scribe while the scribe simultaneously carries out the sage's instructions. The scribe can intervene only if they disagree with something the sage has said (Kagan et al., 2016).

First, I work with students in all of the elementary grade levels, and all of those students are performing below grade level when they come to me, so I work with them in small group settings to help them improve in a variety of areas. I have found that different grade levels and different groups of students embrace different structures. One structure that I use frequently, especially during math instruction, is Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan et al., 2016). On this particular occasion, I was working with the students on multiplication problems using partial products.

Even though the students were familiar with this structure, one scribe in a particular pair abandoned the structure and started solving the problem using the traditional algorithm. After some discussion between the two, and visible annoyance from the first student, he erased what he had written and only wrote what his partner told him to write. After the boys finished the problem, even after the sage assured him that their solution was correct, they decided to check the problem using another method. When the scribe realize that their answer was correct, there was less hesitation and

conflict when solving the second and third problems, even when the jobs of sage and scribe were reversed.

The point here is that the students demonstrated teamwork when they were stuck and explained their thinking, including the critiquing of their partner's thinking. While student occasionally tried to involve me if they disagreed, they worked together for longer, listened to each other to solve problems, and were, ultimately, more successful than they likely would have been independently. The students were completely involved in their task and did not have off-topic conversations until their problems were complete. The students' engagement in their learning, primarily because of the Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan et al., 2016) structure, allowed me to listen and find out where the students, as a group, may have needed further clarification. This impacted the trajectory of my instruction moving forward.

Johnson & Johnson (1999) write that when students work together toward a common goal, the result is higher achievement and greater productivity than working alone. Peers also play a significant role in improving students' motivation, behavior, and overall achievement in school (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). This structure does meet the definition of student engagement described in this study. If we focus on the positive interdependence piece of this activity and specifically look at the mathematical task presented to students, the difficulty of multiplication for students working below grade level is significant to start. Because students must cooperate within the Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan et al., 2016) structure, students feel a sense of support because they are not left to complete the task alone. Each person in this structure has a role, and one cannot complete the work, through the structure, without performing their role. As a result, both students remain engaged throughout because the task requires working together (Kagan &

Kagan, 2009). Additional analysis of this structure is provided below, following Anna's lived experience description.

Impact on decision making. One of the things Alicen has learned as a result of structuring student interaction, is when students work alone and their solutions are wrong or if they do not know how to solve a problem, they tend give up quickly. Alicen realized that when students are working together, they do not want to be wrong. Instead, they want to solve the problem, prove their solution by explaining their thinking, and show their partner that they can be successful. Alicen claimed that understanding how students can be engaged with each other has impacted her pedagogical decision making significantly. She keeps a list of structures that she has taught to students and when planning, thinks about which structure is the best fit for the content she is teaching or for the type of response she wants students will provide (e.g., short answers, longer answers, more than one possible correct answer, etc.).

Students will exert more effort into learning tasks when they feel the risk to participate is low (Kagan & Kagan, 2009), so providing a safe environment that values the contributions of all students is critical. When Alicen considered the below grade level students she works with each day, she said "They have already NOT been successful, so when their actions demonstrate they want to be and can be successful, even if it is with a partner, I'm happy."

Anna

Anna has a Bachelor of Arts and Master's degree in elementary education. Throughout her eight years of teaching, she has only taught in Title I, low socio-economic schools, in grades two through four. At the time of this interview, Anna was teaching 29 fourth graders. When asked about her own experience with student engagement when she was a student, Anna said "everyone did their work and faced the front." She remembered taking class notes in a journal,

studying those, and taking a test a few days later, but there was never more than a surface-level discussion about what they were learning.

Anna said her first contact with student engagement strategies came during her student teaching, and she credited her cooperating teacher with using multiple cooperative learning strategies. She found using the strategies she had seen her cooperating teacher used to be hard to incorporate into her teaching at first, and she admitted to struggling. “It was hard for me at first, because I had been used to teaching a different way.” Anna admitted that it took quite some time for her to feel comfortable with cooperative learning strategies, but used the positive support of her colleagues to change her teaching style. She shared, “And even over all these years, it has just now become natural for me.”

Personal definition of student engagement. Anna considered students to be engaged if they were involved in “academic metacognition throughout audio, visual, and kinesthetic learning.” This is reminiscent of multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 1984). Anna believes that student engagement results in higher level thought and, therefore, a better ability to create and share meaningful responses. This type of engagement calls for sustained dialogue and substantive, academic language use because each member must carry out his/her role if the team is to succeed (Hill & Flynn, 2012). She added that students who are engaged are collaborating, finding their own answers to questions through research, and focused.

Activities that students find engaging hold their interest, even if the task is difficult. She credits the cooperative learning strategies she uses as one of the primary reasons students display interest in learning, believing that the strategy is what excites students, not necessarily the content of the lesson.

Lived experience description. Anna's lived experience description also included the use of Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan et al., 2016) to engage students in their learning. The benefits of this structure include the participation of all students (in one role or another), the verbalization of problem-solving strategies, accountability to their partners for staying on task, and receiving immediate feedback and praise.

One of my most memorable accounts of my students' engagement in their own learning stems from student partners working through multi-step word problems during a mathematics lesson. Throughout the course of the lesson, the strategy the students used required that they explain aloud their thought processes, their strategies, and how they formulated their answers.

Following direct instruction on solving multi-operation word problems, the students were given the task of solving additional multi-operation word problems using a cooperative learning strategy called Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan et al., 2016). As the learners used this strategy, the sage was responsible for telling their scribe what they would and should write on their paper to solve the word problem. As the learner explained their thinking and directed their scribe, the scribe worked diligently to capture the essence of what they were being told by writing it on the paper.

Both learners, although they had different roles, were deeply engaged and focused on the same task. I watched as the learners who were scribes also learned various strategies from the sage's explanations. I also observed learners using various strategies that had been shared during the Number Talks (Parrish, 2014) portion of our daily math instruction.

I felt that the complexity of solving multi-operation word problems provided a rich forum for strategy sharing, understanding, and implementation. After Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan et al., 2016) partners completed their word problem tasks, they were asked to go over their work with their partners and identify as many strategies as they could. This further engaged the students because they were not taking ownership for their self-chosen strategies.

I felt reassured as I observed some of the students learning the name of the strategy they had already used to solve the problem. This also enriched the students as they now felt more confident about what they had practiced and about knowing which strategies facilitated their success. This lesson not only engaged my learners, but it also heightened their sense of awareness about their abilities for future success.

Anna's description here is akin to the earlier analysis of Alicen's lived experience description, where Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan et al., 2016) was also used as a strategy for engagement, focused on the role that peer relationships have on improving motivation and academic achievement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). This particular structure also equalizes students' access to resources. When students work together, they are capable of sharing mental resources or capacities with others. This does not only mean that students *give* resources to other students, they also *receive* resources from other students. In the case of Anna's description, students had access to the solution strategy of others, along with the explanation of that strategy. Also, students were provided with immediate feedback from their peers on tasks that may have been challenging when faced alone, but accessible with the support of a partner.

Impact on decision making. Anna described student engagement as playing a large role in how she makes pedagogical decisions. As mentioned above, using structures for student

interaction and engagement did not come easily at first, but as Anna made engaging students a priority, it did become more comfortable. Now, Anna describes her thought process as predictive in nature. “I know what’s coming and where the lesson is headed. What structure can I use that matches the function I’m trying to accomplish?” Although the student engagement strategies she plans may not necessarily be written down, they emerge as she is teaching, claiming that “almost every other activity ends up being a cooperative learning activity.” Anna finds that the students in her classroom are more interested in learning when she structures their interaction, and she is “not certain that students even realize it is the strategy filling them with excitement.”

Participants’ Group Contributions

A group interview towards the end of the research process was meant for participants to gather and discuss their common understandings of the student engagement phenomenon. It could be argued that gathering a group of participants who do not know each other would be beneficial in terms of more honest and spontaneous beliefs and opinions, but the participants in this case did know each other. While some of the connections within the group were limited to only being colleagues and casual acquaintances within the workplace, others described their relationships to others in the group as friends who spend time together outside of work. I considered the relationship among participants to be a positive one. Because of their friendships and the common context within which this study is bound, I anticipated they would be able to relate to the comments and opinions of others, and challenge those opinions as necessary.

After each participant described their own definition of student engagement and their lived experience descriptions to the other participants in the group, the conversation shifted to the needs of students to talk. Across the group, the participants were all in agreement that

students' talking was often times a problem. In order to shift the conversation back towards the research topic, I asked the participants how they could harness that energy and use it to simultaneously support their teaching and students' subsequent learning. The participants, each in their own way, referred back to the experience they described in this study where student interaction had helped students meet their own need to talk while meeting the learning goals established by the teacher.

Throughout the conversation, participants' connection of students' need to talk with their own need for student learning kept returning to social interaction and its importance. I asked participants the question "Which is more important, academic skills or social skills?". Six of the seven participants indicated they believed social skills were more important than academic skills. A summary of the participants' responses is provided in Table 3.

When I asked the participants to clarify their thinking, it became clear that they were not just describing the social aspect of learning that Johnson & Johnson (2009) call social interdependence (called *positive interdependence* in this study). Social interdependence is described as "outcomes of individuals are affected by their own and others' actions" (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 366). The participants were referring to social skills as skills needed for success in the cooperative classroom as well as the workplace (e.g., verbal communication skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork skills, well-mannered and polite attitudes, etc.). Social skills emerged as an important theme during the group interview and is explored with greater detail in Chapter 5.

Table 3.

Which is more important? Academic or social skills?

Participant	Which is more important? Academic or social skills?	Reasoning
Elizabeth	Social	Achievement can only take you so far. Social skills get you there. Social skills get you through life.
Mary	Social	Social skills are important for long-term success. If you can't get along with others, you probably won't be able to hold a job, regardless of academics. You have to hold a job to be accepted socially.
Sara	Social	I don't believe social skills are taught at home like they should be. Once those are in place, they're going to feel comfortable, safe, and respected and can, therefore, learn.
Patrice	Social	I think social skills paves the way for students to be successful in other areas. If they can communicate with others effectively, that transfers to other areas, including academic ones.
Emma	Social	I don't have use geometry in everyday life. I don't have to write an essay after I read anymore. I do have to interact with people all day, everyday...always.
Alicen	Social	Social skills. Absolutely. Students need to know how to communicate with each other and be socially appropriate.
Anna	Academic	I'm an academic girl. I feel like I would rather have them be solid academically, because I do feel that social skills are learned over time. I feel that academic knowledge is what's needed to be accepted socially.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the study, while Chapter 2 reviewed the empirical research that informed the study. Chapter 3 explicitly described how this study was undertaken. Chapter 4 delineated the findings by reporting participants' responses in interviews and through

writing. Each participant's lived experience with student engagement was described using direct quotes in order to more fully encapsulate their own understandings.

Chapter 5 discusses the study's findings in relation to the research questions. The chapter also provides the significance of the study, especially for understanding student engagement from a teachers' perspective, and includes considerations for future research and limitations

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to this phenomenological case study conducted to determine the essence of teachers' experience with the phenomenon of student engagement and how it has impacted their pedagogical decision making. Chapter 2 reviewed the research that shaped the framework on which this study was conceptualized. Chapter 3 detailed how the study was undertaken through phenomenological case study, and Chapter 4 presented the findings of the six case studies.

Chapter 5 undertakes an in-depth analysis of this phenomenological case study by presenting three emerging themes. As the themes are illustrated, each is discussed based on its relationship to existing student engagement research and contributions to the field. Chapter 5 concludes with suggested opportunities for future research and the limitations of this study.

Cross-Case Analysis

In this study, commonalities from the participants' interviews and lived experience descriptions were analyzed using the whole-part-whole method put forth by Vagle (2014) (see Chapter 3). The whole-part-whole method of analysis grows from the idea that "we must always think about focal meanings (e.g., moments) in relation to the whole (e.g., broader context) from which they are situated" (Vagle, 2014, p. 97). This type of analysis required that each case be analyzed separately so that putting the individual pieces together could create a contextually specific understanding, or essence, of the phenomenon of student engagement. The discussion of case congruencies and incongruencies (as appropriate) are discussed below as they relate to the research questions and how they connect to existing research reviewed in Chapter 2.

Restatement of Research Questions

This phenomenological case study was guided by one main question and one ancillary research question.

Main Research Question: What is the meaning, structure, and essence of teachers' lived experience of student engagement in an elementary classroom?

Ancillary Research Question: How do elementary teachers use the lived experience of student engagement to make future pedagogical decisions?

The answers to these two questions are presented separately below as major findings. Additional findings that emerged from case analysis, beyond those sought by the research questions of this study, are included as well.

Major Finding: Theme 1

The essence of student engagement is student interaction.

One of the hindrances to a collective understanding of student engagement in educational research is lack of consensus on its specific definition (Fredericks et al., 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). While student engagement has developed a holistic meaning since its inception in the early 1980s, many of its distinguishable features or components (e.g. emotional, behavioral, cognitive, agentic, affective, etc.) depend upon the context in which it is being investigated (Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). This same mismatch of definitions of student engagement is true with the participants in this research. Table 4 displays the differences in this study's participants' definitions, in their own words, of student engagement.

Table 4.

Participants' Definitions of Student Engagement

Participant	How do you define student engagement?
Elizabeth	Student engagement is when students are motivated and excited about what they are learning. Their curiosity and interest keep them focused. It also involves students collaborating and having discussions with others.
Mary	Students actively participating either independently or with others.
Sara	Student engagement is when students are invested in what they are learning and can't wait to continue working on it, learning more, and sharing with others about what they have learned.
Patrice	Student engagement is created when students are presented with academic and non-academic activities that enable them to equally participate within a group. These activities are of high interest to the students, so they are genuinely motivated to be successful.
Emma	Student engagement is interest and participating in a learning task by themselves or with others. Engagement is students actively involved in their learning.
Alicen	Students completely involved in their learning while working on their own or with others.
Anna	Students involved in active metacognition throughout audio, visual, and kinesthetic learning with others.

Most of these definitions of student engagement involve aspects of students being motivated or interested by the learning activity, being actively involved in their learning, and/or sharing the learning workload (i.e., collaboration during the learning task) or sharing the end results of the workload with others. None of the participants' definitions of student engagement match perfectly to the one put forth in this study: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement that manifest through positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction (see Chapter 2) (Appleton et al., 2008; Deutsch, 1949; Fredericks et al., 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan, 1994). The fact that there is a misalignment between definitions, not only between the participants' and the one provided in

this study, but also between the participants themselves, is proof that conclusions drawn from student engagement research may be frustratingly limited because student engagement does not mean the same thing to everyone (Block, 2000; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). This is particularly problematic considering that all of the participants, within the context of this study, have received at least some initial training specifically on cooperative learning structures that engage students.

After participants were asked to define student engagement, I asked them to describe what student engagement would look like and sound like. These descriptions, however, were more aligned with each other and with the definition of student engagement put forth in this study. Using participants' own words, Table 5 summarizes how participants described the look and sound of student engagement (boldface type added for emphasis).

The participants' descriptions in these areas were critically important for understanding their lived experience with and understanding of the phenomenon of student engagement. Phenomenology rests on the assumption that researchers, through their methodology, can establish an essential structure to the phenomenon being studied (Vagle, 2014). While some of the finer points of what student engagement looks like and sounds like may differ, the boldfaced words descriptors in Table 5 help identify this study's main finding: student interaction is the essence of student engagement. All of the participants described sights and sounds that included student interaction in some form (i.e. students working with other students, collaborating, actively participating, eager to explain and show what they are working on, groups of 2 or 4 students working together, involved either with others or solo, etc.).

Table 5.

Participants' Descriptions of What Student Engagement Looks Like and Sounds Like

Participant	What does student engagement look like and sound like?
Elizabeth	Student engagement can look chaotic; students working with other students collaborating , having discussions, debating, learning from and teaching each other . Student engagement can occur in silence, where students are focused on their work, and they are taking ownership of their learning.
Mary	Students actively participating either independently or with others .
Sara	Students are focused and passionate about what they are working on. They are eager to explain and show what they are working on with others .
Patrice	Student engagement looks like groups of 2 or 4 students working together with each student having a task or responsibility . I also think that when student engagement is present, students are positively reinforcing each other. It is not only academic engagement, but also non-academic or those activities that build on their social skills interactions.
Emma	Engagement is students actively involved in their learning—either with others or solo . It is asking questions, doing research, and taking ownership of their learning.
Alicen	Students are working on their own or with others , and their questions are relevant to their learning.
Anna	Students are collaborating , researching, and focused.

Student interaction being the essence of the phenomenon of student engagement is also supported by the lived experience descriptions submitted by each participant. Table 6 summarizes the lived experience descriptions of each participant (boldface type added for emphasis).

Through this overview of how study participants have experienced student engagement in their classrooms and how they have described the importance of social interaction within student engagement, a significant connection to cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2014; Sharan, 2014) and basic needs theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) has emerged. Each of the participants'

descriptions describe a learning activity that is cooperative in nature, whereby students work in pairs or teams (see Table 6 boldface words or phrases) to help accomplish learning goals by working with their peers instead of against them or for solo satisfaction (Johnson & Johnson 2014; Sharan, 2014). These types of learning structures help students meet their most basic needs.

Table 6.

Overview of Participants' Lived Experience Descriptions

Participant	Brief description of activity when students were engaged.
Elizabeth	Students working in teams, collaborating to create a robot out of recycled materials.
Mary	Students working with partners on understanding imagery.
Sara	Students practicing reading fluency with partners and in front of the class.
Patrice	Students using a team structure to generate character traits.
Emma	Students using a team structures to review poetry skills.
Alicen	Student pairs using a structure to demonstrate procedural understanding of multiplication using various algorithms.
Anna	Student pairs using a structure to demonstrate procedural understanding with mathematical problem solving.

Consistent with basic needs theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), this research on student engagement supports prior research on the autonomy, competence, and relatedness that students are intrinsically motivated to seek. Autonomy refers to students seeking activities or experiences endorsed by the self, which was evident in the participants' descriptions when students work with a partner of their choice, determine the trajectory of that partnership, and perceived choice over their actions within the learning activity (Reeve, Nix, & Hamm, 2003). When learning activities involve the need for students to be effective, for their own satisfaction and for the

inherent satisfaction that comes from performing well in front of others, the psychological need of competence is met (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The need for competence was displayed in this research when students worked with partners and put forth effort to demonstrate their skill or acumen in front of their peers (i.e., during Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan et al., 2016) structure described by Alicen and Anna, during the AllWrite Consensus (Kagan et al., 2016) structure described by Patrice, and during the RoundTable (Kagan et al., 2016) and Jot Thoughts (Kagan et al., 2016) structures described by Emma). Relatedness refers to the psychological need for students to establish emotional bonds and connections with others in ways that show caring and responsiveness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 1991). This manifested in the research of this study (see Table 5 boldface words or phrases) when, during each lived experience description, students worked with a partner, in teams of four, or larger groups in ways that demonstrated authentic caring (Ryan, 1993).

Basic needs theory is related to student engagement because it helps teachers understand why students demonstrate active engagement in some situations and why they may not in others (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). When teachers provide students the opportunity to learn in novel and challenging ways, teachers are providing opportunities for students to meet their basic needs through social interaction during learning tasks.

As a result of the analysis of this research, it has been determined that the essence of student engagement is student interaction. Through cooperative learning and basic needs theory, students in this study have consistently been engaged as a result of social interaction specifically structured by the participants of this study (i.e., students' classroom teachers). Social interaction, especially the relationships between students and peers, is vital to increased student achievement both now and throughout the student's academic career (Ou, 2005).

Major Finding: Theme 2

Student engagement impacts teacher decision making.

This research also found that teachers make pedagogical decisions to engage students either before lessons or during lessons. When these decisions were made prior to the lesson, teachers primarily had a cooperative learning structure in mind appropriately suited to the ultimate objective of the learning activity. For example, Anna, Alicen, Patrice, and Emma made decisions to use structures, with specifically targeted student interactions, based on the intended outcomes of their lessons. Anna and Alicen both decided to use the Sage-N-Scribe (Kagan et al., 2016) structure because their intended learning goal was for students to demonstrate, verbally with a partner, their processual understanding of and solutions for different types of mathematical problems. Patrice and Emma used structures that required students, in pairs or teams, to brainstorm, ultimately leading to accomplishing the intended learning goal of their lessons. Elizabeth's decision making was based on what she knew about her students and how they respond to student interaction. While her learning activity for students was engaging by nature (e.g., hands-on, creative, novel, and captured the basic needs of students), her decision to create and implement the project she did was based on her prior knowledge that students working in teams provides an engaging experience.

Two participants in this study made pedagogical decisions to engage their students during the lesson to either maintain engagement or to regain engagement. First, Sara's pedagogical decision making was impacted when she recognized her students being engaged as they practiced reading fluency. It was this engagement with the original activity that caused her to reimagine what to do next to keep her students engaged with the rehearsal of the skill with partners. Mary's pedagogical decision making was impacted when she recognized her students

to be slipping out of engagement. According to her lived experience description, students were succeeding and fully participating until they were asked to work independently. Seeing the engagement level fall during this lesson, Mary moved students back into partner groupings and regained their participation. It is important to note, in Mary's case, that it is unclear whether students were unable to work independently as a result of not being engaged or because they were unable to successfully master the learning task. It has been shown, however, that when student pairs were put but back into place, the student interaction helped increased student success toward learning goals.

Although teachers' pedagogical decision making was not specifically discussed in the empirical literature reviewed in this study (see Chapter 2), the theory of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) is directly related to decision making tasks. According to flow theory, it is the simultaneous experience of concentration, interest, and enjoyment that are required for flow to occur (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). This research shows that teachers who specifically structure learning activities for students to improve their skills sets and meet new challenges, especially through student interaction, is an effective way to keep students engaged.

Additional Finding: Theme 3

Social skills are critically important.

An unexpected finding from this research was that six out of the seven participants felt the development of social skills was more important than the development of academic skills (see Table 2). Six of the participants stated that social skills were more important than academic skills because of their importance to everyday life (i.e., helps achieve and maintain long-term success, provide ways to positively and effectively communicate with others, etc.). Sara added that social skills in the classroom help other students feel safe and comfortable which establishes

a learning environment conducive to learning and risk-taking. The importance of social skills in terms of being life-long skills and skills necessary for learning in the classrooms is reflected in the literature related to student engagement.

Research from Johnson & Johnson (1999) reveals that successful skill attainment acquired as a result of cooperative learning requires both interpersonal and small group skills that must be explicitly taught to students. Skills such as taking turns, listening, asking questions, clarifying ideas, decision making, negotiating, respecting differences and many other social skills are what Kagan (2009) calls the *embedded curriculum*. While many teachers find, including some of the participants in this study, allocating time to teach a specific character education curriculum elusive, it is more authentic to help students acquire social skills by embedding the skills into how they teach and how students learn via cooperative learning.

If we treat character as curriculum, we are likely to teach lessons on virtues such as integrity, honesty, respect, and citizenship. If, on the other hand, we understand the power of the embedded curriculum, we are likely to choose instructional strategies that allow students to acquire those virtues. If we teach a lesson on honesty in the fall, even a great lesson, will students actually be more honest when we assess that virtue at the end of the school year? Not likely. If on the other hand we use instructional strategies all school year which pull honesty from our students, they will acquire that virtue. A lesson on the importance of cooperation will not make students more cooperative, but use of cooperative learning structures all school year will (Kagan, 2002, para. 15).

It is important to note that Anna, the only participant who did not agree with social skills outweighing academic skills, did not dismiss social skills as unimportant. Rather, Anna believes that as academic knowledge increases over time, so do the accompanying social skills.

Additional Contributions to the Field

Beyond the three findings of this research listed above, there are several contributions to be drawn from this research that broadly impact teacher education.

Demographic Differences

The proportion of students of color to teachers of color in this study is disparate. Demographic data of students enrolled at the school used in this study show the student 68.6% Hispanic, 13.7% Black, 11.62 White, 4.13% Two Races, and 1.23% Pacific Islander (Nevada Report Card, 2014-2015). Of the 798 enrolled during the 2015-2016 school year, 87.8% of students received free or reduced lunch. While keeping in mind that there were only six teacher participants used in this study, 66.6% of the participants were White, 16.6% Hispanic, and 16.6% African American. Even though research has generally found that teachers to be “a crucial component in ethnic minority students’ learning” (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012, p. 88), the difference in diversity between these two groups is glaring. In this study, however, none of the participants mentioned the high number of students of color in their classroom as being problematic. Their statements, in every case, demonstrated their desire for creating and implementing learning opportunities for all students through social interaction, while developing critical social skills.

Some scholars would argue that cooperative learning, where the development of successful learning environments is, in part, created by students, does not offer all students, especially students of color, the opportunity to shine. Some would argue that this type of learning is disconnected from the sociopolitical context of what is best or appropriate for *all* students in *all* contexts (Nieto & Bode, 2012). I would argue that cooperative learning structures provide the opportunity for teachers to engage *all* students. It makes no sense to call on one

student (e.g. the student who likely has their hand raised to answer every question), when a teacher can engage every mind through cooperative learning. By meeting the basic needs of each student (see Chapter 2), students are able to find a supportive experience with other students, perhaps even reversing disengagement or underachievement within their team groups, regardless of their demographic or marginalized status.

In a broader sense, structuring student interaction does equalize access to educational resources within the classroom. One of the benefits of cooperative learning is immediate reinforcement, in the form of praise from peers, immediately following the completion of a learning task instead of two or three days later (i.e., after an assignment has been graded). This type of peer-based feedback is also distributed more equitably because it is not the same group of students providing the responses to teachers' questions. All students, especially students of color, have a greater opportunity to verbalize their thinking and receive corrective feedback that they might not normally receive. In a cooperative learning environment, students not only *give* resources to other students, but also *receive* resources from other students, making the accessibility to equitable opportunities to take risks, rewards/praise, and feedback via social interaction more likely.

Teacher Efficacy

Many teachers come to the profession with a sense of perseverance that is deeply rooted within their identities and often demonstrated in their work with students each day. The participants' identities in this study are not only defined by their individual, demographic characteristics, but also by their perseverance toward transformative learning experiences and a fundamental belief in the lives and minds of their students. When, as a result of their perseverance in quality pedagogical decision making, teachers see engaged and successful

students, their enjoyment of teaching and their confidence in their pedagogy, their overall self-efficacy, is strengthened (Bandura, 1997). Teachers who have this type of confidence are likely to have greater affective orientations towards students, who then, in turn, demonstrate greater motivation and engagement within classrooms, thereby creating a classroom climate that positively influences learning outcomes (Konstantopoulos, 2009).

Future Research Opportunities

Based on the findings of this research, there are several recommendations for further study that could improve our understanding of student engagement and pedagogical decision making.

1. There are many things that could describe the essence of teaching and that could be named as foundational. Engaging students in challenging learning tasks through student interaction is foundational and must be taught to all teachers before they enter the profession. Additional analysis of undergraduate programs where cooperative learning is meaningfully used to teach teachers is necessary in order for system-wide change to occur.
2. A better understanding of engagement across contexts is necessary. While we know that teachers, the school community, peers, parents, and others influence students' engagement in school (Knifsend & Graham, 2012; Osterman, 2000; & Shin et al., 2007), we do not have a clear idea of how those contextual influences impact each other to support, or not support, student engagement.
3. Does the impact of students' experiences of being engaged across grade levels impact present engagement and achievement? How does the impact of a campus-wide focus on engagement through challenging and meaningful learning experiences impact student

achievement over time? Also, how, if at all, do students reconcile inconsistent messages about their overall engagement or social interaction into their academic identities?

4. If we are to consider schools to be a developmental context for appropriate social skills and other characteristics deemed to be admirable, how do those identities intertwine or merge with outside contexts (i.e., families, homes, cultures, neighborhood dynamics, etc.) to shape student engagement?

Limitations of the Study

All research studies have limitations and noting those limitations implies the understanding of that reality (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). One of the limitations of this study could be the self-reporting nature of the interviews and the lived experience descriptions provided by teacher participants. Self-report measures are susceptible to social desirability bias, especially when considering the researcher's passion for the topic of student engagement, and every effort was made to establish a forthright and judgment-free interview. The interview questions used in this study were open, dialogic in nature, and flexible, in order to illuminate explicit focus on the phenomenon itself. The interview questions also developed a shared experience between the researcher and the participants and amongst the participants themselves. The lived experience description, however, did not necessarily evoke the long and detail-rich narratives that I had anticipated. This could perhaps have been a result of participants' self-imposed time limitations, their inability to express themselves clearly through writing, or a combination of the two.

Some scholars may believe that the participants being bound within a single elementary school constitutes a limitation. In phenomenological research, the aim is to understand a phenomenon from the participants' perspective with great depth (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

To do so, implementing this study within the specified boundaries developed a context-specific and context-dependent understanding of student engagement that led the participants therein to a method of learning that potentially enriched their practice (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Similarly, some may consider a participant sample from a single elementary school where the site-based priorities for classroom pedagogy and teacher development are focused on student engagement to be problematic for a study on the same topic. While student engagement is a building-wide priority for this particular site, data from this study showed that each participant implemented structures for student engagement at a variety of levels, purpose, and expertise. As a result, a site-wide or campus-wide focus on student engagement did not impact the overall implications of this study or create bias toward verification of the researcher's preconceived notions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of student engagement as it manifested in elementary classrooms, as well as to explore how teachers' understanding of student engagement, through their personal, lived experiences, impacted their pedagogical decision making. Through analysis of interviews and written, lived experience descriptions, this study found that the essence of teachers' experience with student engagement is student interaction. This study also found that teachers make pedagogical decisions before and during lessons in order to keep their students engaged. Additionally, this study found that developing social skills is of tremendous importance.

Ladson-Billings (2006), when describing the enormity of the education debt in this country, suggests one option to settle that debt is by declaring bankruptcy. She continues "a setting where a catastrophic occurrence, perhaps a natural disaster—a hurricane—has completely

obliterated the schools” (p. 10) may be another solution. While both options offer hyperbolic, unrealistic solutions to deeply-rooted problems in our education system, these images may compel us to teach with a greater sense of purpose and with greater compassion in order to begin to shrink the ever-mounting debt. Teachers, education leaders, and policymakers across the country have a moral obligation to face this debt. As teachers, when we inculcate student engagement into our classrooms through our pedagogical decision making, we are taking small, but powerful, steps towards the equitable and just responsibility we owe our communities and society as a whole.

Appendix A

Recruitment Script

Hello, my name is Andrew Goodman. I am a doctoral student at UNLV in the Teaching & Learning Department. I am conducting a research study about teachers' approach to teaching and related student engagement in learning. I am specifically interested in learning more about the in-the-moment decisions teachers make about how to proceed with their instruction to maintain student engagement when they see students engaging with course content at a high level. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a primary or intermediate teacher.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in: 1) a preliminary survey; 2) a preliminary face-to-face interview; 3) follow-up face-to-face interview; 4) group interviews; and 5) 3-5 reflective written exercises. I estimate that the time you will spend participating in this study will not exceed 10 hours. All of these data gathering activities will be undertaken at an off-campus location mutually convenient to you and me, and outside of your regularly contracted work time.

There may be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. You may experience insights about your own teaching that help you improve your practice. Further, those insights may help me to better understand, more broadly, how teacher pedagogical decision-making shifts when student engagement increases. This information may be used to improve pre-service teacher education, in-service teacher training, as well as to inform educational policy.

While there are various risks involved in all research studies, the risks associated with your participation in this study are expected to be minimal. For example, you may feel uncomfortable answering some of the interview questions.

Your identity as a participant in this study will be protected to the greatest degree possible—you will be given a pseudonym in the study that only I know. All the data that I collect from you will only be linked to your pseudonym. Additional potentially identifying information (your school, district, city, state) will also be identified in the study only by pseudonym. No raw data will be included in the official record of the study, nor related publications, and will be destroyed after 5 years. However, because of the group interviews this study requires, despite the ethic of confidentiality to which all study participants will be asked to adhere, it is possible that your involvement in the study could be revealed if another participant chooses to breach this ethic.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, entirely unrelated to your contracted employment as a teacher, and you can withdraw from participation at any time without consequence.

There will be no financial cost to you to participate in this study, nor will you receive any compensation to participate in it.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please complete the form below and return it to me in person in a confidential context by 3 p.m. on Friday, January 8.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Andrew Goodman, Co-Principal Investigator
Dr. Christine Clark, Principal Investigator

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Yes! I would like to volunteer to participate in the study about teachers' approach to teaching and related student engagement in learning being conducted by Mr. Andrew Goodman.

Name: _____

Grade Level: _____

Phone Number: _____

Personal E-mail: _____

Appendix B

Informed Consent



INFORMED CONSENT

Department of Teaching & Learning

TITLE OF STUDY: The Manifestation of Student Engagement in Classrooms: A Phenomenological Case Study of How Teachers Experience Student Engagement and How it Influences pedagogical Decision Making

INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. Christine Clark & Andrew Goodman

For questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Christine Clark at 702-895-3888.

For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted, contact **the UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794, toll free at 877-895-2794 or via email at IRB@unlv.edu.**

Purpose of the Study

I am conducting a research study about teachers' approach to teaching and related student engagement in learning. I am specifically interested in learning more about the in-the-moment decisions teachers make about how to proceed with their instruction to maintain student engagement with course content at a high level.

Participants

You are being asked to participate in the study because you fit this study's criteria: a sampling of primary and intermediate teachers who teach within the researcher's school district.

Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in: 1) a preliminary survey; 2) a preliminary face-to-face interview; 3) a follow-up face-to-face interview; 4) group interviews; and 5) 3-5 reflective written exercises. I estimate that the time you will spend participating in this study will not exceed 10 hours. All of these data gathering activities will be undertaken at an off-campus location mutually convenient to you and me, and outside of your regularly contracted work time.

Benefits of Participation

There may be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. You may experience insights about your own teaching that help you improve your practice. Further, those insights may help me to better understand, more broadly, how teacher pedagogical decision-making shifts when student engagement increases. This information may be used to improve pre-service teacher education, in-service teacher training, as well as to inform educational policy.

Risks of Participation

While there are various risks involved in all research studies, the risks associated with your participation in this study are expected to be minimal. For example, you may feel uncomfortable answering some of the interview questions.

Cost /Compensation

#820087-1, Exempted 12-09-15

TITLE OF STUDY: The Manifestation of Student Engagement in Classrooms: A Phenomenological Case Study of How Teachers Experience Student Engagement and How It Influences Pedagogical Decision Making

There will not be financial cost to you to participate in this study, nor will you receive any compensation to participate in it.

Confidentiality

Your identity as a participant in this study will be protected to the greatest degree possible—you will be given a pseudonym in the study that only I know. All the data that I collect from you will be linked to your pseudonym. Additional potentially identifying information (your school, district, city, state) will also be identified in the study only by pseudonym. However, because of the group interviews this study requires, despite the ethic of confidentiality to which all study participants are asked to adhere, it is possible that your involvement in the study could be revealed if another participant chooses to breach this ethic. No raw data will be included in the official record of the study, nor related publications.

All collected data will remain locked in a filing cabinet at Culley Elementary (Room 30) during throughout the study, and will be destroyed after 5 years. Data kept on a computer or word processing program will be password-protected, only accessible by the Principal Investigator or Co-Principal Investigator, and will be deleted after 5 years.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, entirely unrelated to your contracted employment as a teacher, and you can withdraw from participation at any time without consequence.

Participant Consent:

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I have been able to ask questions about the research study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Signature of Participant

Date

Participant Name (Please Print)

Audio/Video Taping:

I agree to be audio or video taped for the purpose of this research study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Participant Name (Please Print)

#820087-1, Exempted 12-09-15

Appendix C

Preliminary Survey Questions

1. Describe your teaching experience (years, school populations, grade levels, class sizes).
2. Describe your educational background (degrees, special certifications).
3. What is your present teaching assignment (location and grade level)?
4. Describe the training you have had regarding student engagement.
5. How do you define student engagement?
6. What does student engagement look like?
7. How do you know when students are engaged?
8. What types of activities engage students?

Appendix D

Interview Questions

1. If you were to walk into another teacher's classroom, how would you know (or be able to tell) if his/her students were engaged? What does that look like or feel like?
2. In your particular grade level, what engages students in their learning?
3. How much is student engagement a part of your pedagogical decision making? In other words, what types of thought process (if any) contribute to how you make decisions about activities that are engaging for students?
4. Describe a time when you knew that students were engaged in a learning activity? What did that look like? What feedback did you receive from students? How was the quality of student work impacted by students being engaged? How did you feel during and after the lesson when you saw that students were engaged? How would you describe your role (as teacher) during the lesson?
5. How did that particular experience with student engagement impact (or not impact) your future pedagogical decision making?

Appendix E

Group Interview Questions

1. Describe a time when students were engaged in their learning in your classroom. What did it look like? What did it sound like?
2. How do you think that engagement benefited students?
3. How did that engagement benefit the teacher?
4. What impact does student engagement have on your attitudes and beliefs about teaching?
How does experiencing student engagement impact your pedagogy?
5. How does our “group” experience impact our understanding of student engagement? Do we, either as a group or (perhaps) individually, understand this phenomenon as a shared experience as it manifests in our world?

Appendix F

Instructional Review Board Approval



UNLV Social/Behavioral IRB - Exempt Notice

DATE: December 9, 2015

TO: Christine Clark
FROM: Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects

PROTOCOL TITLE: [820087-1] The Manifestation of Student Engagement in Classrooms: A Phenomenological Case Study of How Teachers Experience Engagement and How It Influences Pedagogical Decision Making

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
EXEMPT DATE: December 9, 2015
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this protocol. This memorandum is notification that the protocol referenced above has been reviewed as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45CFR46.101(b) and deemed exempt.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence with our records.

PLEASE NOTE:

Upon final determination of exempt status, the research team is responsible for conducting the research as stated in the exempt application reviewed by the ORI - HS and/or the IRB which shall include using the most recently submitted Informed Consent/Assent Forms (Information Sheet) and recruitment materials. The official versions of these forms are indicated by footer which contains the date exempted.

Any changes to the application may cause this protocol to require a different level of IRB review. Should any changes need to be made, please submit a **Modification Form**. When the above-referenced protocol has been completed, please submit a **Continuing Review/Progress Completion report** to notify ORI HS of its closure.

If you have questions, please contact the Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects at IRB@unlv.edu or call 702-895-2794. Please include your protocol title and IRBNet ID in all correspondence.

Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects
4505 Maryland Parkway . Box 451047 . Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-1047
(702) 895-2794 . FAX: (702) 895-0805 . IRB@unlv.edu

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Curriculum Vitae

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Education

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University of Nevada, Las Vegas Las Vegas, NV
Dissertation title: *The Manifestation of Student Engagement: A Phenomenological Case Study of How Teachers Experience Student Engagement and How It Influences Pedagogical Decision Making*
Adviser: Dr. Christine Clark
- May 2003 **Master of Arts in Curriculum & Instruction**
Emporia State University Emporia, KS
Concentration: Effective Practitioner
- May 1999 **Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education**
University of Missouri, Kansas City Kansas City, MO
- May 1994 **Bachelor of Arts in Communications**
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Concentration: Journalism

Licensure

Elementary, K-6
Nevada Standard Instructional Certificate

Professional Presentations

Crosthwaite, J., & Goodman, A. (2013, April). *Discovering Geometric Concepts through Children's Literature*. Presented at the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, Denver, CO.

K-12 Teaching Experience

- August 2014 – Present **Culley Elementary School, Las Vegas, NV**
Grade 4 Math and Science

August 2008 – May 2014	Cunningham Elementary School , Las Vegas, NV Grade 4 Math and Science, Learning Strategist, RTI Coordinator
August 2000 – May 2008	Washington Elementary , Olathe, KS Grade 4 and Grade 5
August 1999 – May 2000	Forrest Hills Elementary , Decatur, GA Grade 3

Additional Experience

June 2016 – July 2016	Rebel Academy , Las Vegas, NV Supervision of ARL teacher candidates via UNLV
June 2015 – Present	Kagan School Trainer

Honors and Awards

2016 Finalist – Heart of Education Awards for Clark County