A Case Study: The Perceptions of Teachers of Urban Eighth-Grade At-Risk Students, in one NJ School District, Regarding the Classroom Factors that Facilitate and Inhibit At-Risk Student Motivation to Excel Academically

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A CASE STUDY: THE PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS OF URBAN EIGHTH-GRADE AT-RISK STUDENTS, IN ONE NJ SCHOOL DISTRICT, REGARDING THE CLASSROOM FACTORS THAT FACILITATE AND INHIBIT AT-RISK STUDENT MOTIVATION TO EXCEL ACADEMICALLY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Seton Hall University

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SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

A CASE STUDY: THE PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS OF URBAN EIGHTH-GRADE AT-RISK STUDENTS, IN ONE NJ SCHOOL DISTRICT, REGARDING THE CLASSROOM FACTORS THAT FACILITATE AND INHIBIT AT-RISK STUDENT MOTIVATION TO EXCEL ACADEMICALLY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of teachers of urban eighth-grade at-risk students in one New Jersey school district regarding the classroom factors that facilitate and inhibit at-risk student motivation to excel academically.

An interview protocol that included semi-structured, open-ended questions was utilized to capture the perceptions of 18 teachers of at-risk students in core content areas. Interview questions were designed in consultation with seminal research in the area of student motivation as well as Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. The latter also provided the conceptual framework through which the study’s findings were analyzed.

Rich qualitative data were gleaned from interviews. After careful analysis of interview transcripts, themes emerged which influenced the study’s conclusions. As it relates to the factors that facilitate motivation, the study’s first and second themes and conclusions held that urban eighth-grade at-risk students are motivated by caring and motivated teachers as well as student-directed learning experiences. Looking to the factors that inhibit motivation, the themes and conclusions were that teacher-centered learning approaches and indifferent and/or uncaring teachers inhibit urban at-risk student motivation. Finally, a fifth theme and conclusion underscored that teachers building meaningful relationships with at-risk students works to facilitate motivation.

This research has implications in the areas of education program funding, curriculum development and implementation, testing, hiring practices, and teacher training.
Acknowledgments

If you have knowledge,
let others light their candles in it.
— Margaret Fuller

My doctoral journey represented more than exploring an issue and seeking answers to research questions; it was a dynamic lesson about life. This process awakened and refined my purpose and made me a believer in the power of giving. When we give, we declare that people matter; we uplift each other and inspire a much better world. Throughout this journey, I was uplifted by the gifts of many. It is their contributions that have led to the success of this project. To my mentor, Dr. Barbara Strobert, your gifts of consistent encouragement, targeted guidance, and patience helped me to keep moving forward every time I considered quitting—and there were many times. Dr. Strobert, I feel highly fortunate to have had you in my corner throughout the Ed.S. and doctoral programs. You are a model of strength, authenticity, and fearlessness. You’ve inspired me to be courageous in the pursuit of my dreams; and for that I will always be grateful.

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To all of the phenomenal and passionate teachers who participated in this project, thank you from the bottom of my heart. None of this would have been possible if not for your gifts of time and honest reflections on your experiences with at-risk students.
To my family and friends, thank you for your support and love. I couldn’t have done this without you. A special thank you to Dr. Zachary Yamba, my first mentor. I celebrate you for your tenacity of purpose and courageous leadership. You are a remarkable human being and model example of what it means to be selfless. I thank you for every word of encouragement. You forever have my gratitude and love.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my husband Yusif, our three amazingly intelligent, strong and beautiful daughters, Zara, Yasmine, and Aria, our future children (if God wills it), my mother, Joan, and to Sydney.

To Yusif, my soulmate, your love, honesty, and support continue to inspire the best in me. Throughout my lengthy doctoral experience, I witnessed you execute new roles and responsibilities with patience and commitment as you managed your own post-graduate studies. I don’t know how you do what you do, but I am forever grateful and thank you for your many sacrifices. I love you.

To my children, Mommy did this for you. You were created to positively impact this world. Find and fulfill your God-given purpose and live fearlessly. I love you.

To my mother, Joan, and to Sydney, thank you for your unconditional love, encouragement, and all of the babysitting. Your grandchildren adore you. I love you.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

There is a population of students who experience tremendous stress academically. In the available literature, they are regarded as at-risk learners. This study explores the unique challenges faced by at-risk learners through the perspective of teachers. The strategies, which may work to inspire a high level of motivation to increase student performance, are explored both through available literature and the experiences of teachers who work with at-risk students.

Lehr and Harris (1988), in their book *At Risk, Low-Achieving Students in the Classroom*, today remain correct when they emphasized that available literature fails to agree on a set published definition of the at-risk learner. However, what is prevalent in the research are specific characteristics or needs of this population. “Possible labels for these students include the following: disadvantaged, dropout prone, culturally deprived, alienated, underachiever, marginal, non-achiever, disenfranchised, low ability, impoverished, slow learner, underprivileged, less able, low-performing, low socioeconomic status, remedial, language-impaired (Lehr and Harris, 1988, p.9).

Many of these characteristics are present in more current research. Alfassi (2003) simplifies the definition of “at-risk students” to reflect students who have failed or experienced difficulty academically. In agreement is Mason (2013), who explains that students who have made poor choices, which have had a negative impact on their education, are also considered at risk. In many cases, at-risk students do not have adequate parental support and maintain an overall low academic self-concept, which creates the situation of academic struggle and
increased risk of dropping out of school (Mason, 2013). When students drop out of school, they “struggle to make ends meet because they must take lower-paying jobs, sometimes working two jobs in order to pay their bills” (Mason, 2013, p. 6).

Further, Pogrow (1990) captures the specific academic challenges of at-risk students. From struggling to work with ideas to forming linkages among concepts critical for retention and problem-solving, at-risk students struggle to keep up with their peers. Pogrow (1990) distinguished additional academic issues:

They do not readily generalize, hypothesize, or predict- or even recognize that they are supposed to. They have no idea how to manipulate the types of knowledge used in school, and many do not seem aware that anything represented by symbols can be understood. (p. 62)

These academic challenges as well as the factors to which they can be attributed present a tremendous challenge for educators. Research highlights the importance of at-risk students developing a high level of motivation to succeed (Dicintio & Gee, 1999). However, most at-risk students have low self-efficacy and internal motivation, which results in a great deal of academic stress (Solberg, Caristrom, Howard, & Jones, 2007). Thus, it becomes urgently important to provide early and sustained interventions to this group.

Dicintio & Gee (1999) advise that a major first step to winning this battle is creating the circumstance to instigate at-risk students’ development of high levels of intrinsic motivation to take ownership of their learning and accept opportunities to excel academically. Other researchers add that no one approach is equipped to effectively meet all of the needs of at-risk students; rather, it is a combination of approaches used appropriately that has the potential to
improve the learning experience of at-risk students (Solberg, Caristrom, Howard, & Jones, 2007; Knesting, 2008; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009; Holloway & Salinitri, 2010).

Gaining a full understanding of at-risk students and their propensity to struggle academically requires more than an assessment of their characteristics—it also requires a consideration of factors within the school that impact their learning (Knesting, 2008). Examining the classroom factors that facilitate high levels of motivation, as well as those that inhibit motivation for at-risk students, is important to helping educational leaders as well as teachers to provide the learning environment and targeted instruction to meet the needs of at-risk learners.

Statement of the Problem

The challenge of meeting the needs of students at-risk for academic failure continues to be a great one. Among the many issues that at-risk students face, which may include low self-efficacy and limited family support and connections with teachers and peers, is the struggle of lower levels of internal motivation (Solberg, Caristrom, Howard, & Jones, 2007). Taking a solid place in the research is the notion that increasing the level of student motivation to excel can inspire improved academic performance.

Dicintio & Gee (1999), in one such study, found that the optimal learning environment for at-risk students is one that is motivationally adaptive and provides students with control over their learning. In a similar way, Cardetti and McKenna, (2011) emphasized that students are motivated in many different ways, including intrinsic satisfaction, bribery, and competition, among others; and the teacher is challenged to “recognize their students’ motivational orientations and carefully tailor their teaching to the different styles of their students” (p. 362).
A plethora of other studies provide strategies and approaches that educators can use to motivate at-risk students (Rieg, 2007; Lam, Cheng, & Ma, 2009; Kohn, 2010).

This study adds to the research by utilizing a qualitative methodology to explore urban at-risk student motivation. In doing this, the study presents the real perceptions of teachers of urban eighth-grade at-risk students in one New Jersey school district regarding the classroom factors that both facilitate and inhibit student motivation to succeed.

**Purpose of the Study**

The impact of at-risk learners in education is unquestionably significant. In an environment with an increased reliance on test scores to determine success, schools remain unclear on how to effectively respond to at-risk learners’ needs and their propensity to perform poorly on achievement tests. Banks and Eaton (2014), in a study about improving test performance for at-risk learners, make a strong point about exploring all factors that affect test takers’ performance, including non-cognitive factors. These non-cognitive variables are those that influence a student’s motivation to perform on achievement tests. The researchers further emphasize that doing so is “critical because the validity of conclusions made from test scores relies on test-takers’ efforts to demonstrate competence. Being aware of the association between noncognitive constructs and test-taker performance will result in more valid assumptions about student learning” (p. 207).

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers of urban eighth-grade at-risk students in one New Jersey school district regarding the classroom factors that facilitate or inhibit student motivation to excel. Results from the study may provide educators with key information to ensure greater opportunities for achievement for the at-risk population.
It is important to emphasize that the dearth of research, which solicits qualitative data regarding the perceptions and experiences of teachers of at-risk students regarding motivation in the classroom, underscores the importance of the current study. By providing a rich description of the motivation of at-risk students from the perceptions of teachers, the literature is advanced, and educators may have some guidance on how to begin to effectively respond to the unique needs of eighth-grade students.

**Research Questions**

“Qualitative researchers are most likely to raise research questions based on three factors: (1) what has personal meaning to them; (2) what they read and discover to be gaps in the literature; and (3) what they perceive during their first exposure to the field, or the study setting” (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012, p. 79). For the current study, each factor has relevance in the creation of the research questions. A description of the researcher’s background and specific interest in exploring this issue is presented in chapter III. Important to the study is not only investigating how to increase student motivation within the classroom but also how to eliminate the factors that negatively impact motivation. Three central questions guide this inquiry: These are as follows:

1. What classroom factors, if any, facilitate motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth?
2. What classroom factors, if any, inhibit motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth?
3. How, if at all, can teachers effectively motivate urban eighth-grade at-risk youth?
Design and Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is most appropriate when the variables of a research problem are unknown and need to be explored (Creswell, 2012). Further, such research collects data and analyzes the data to find meaning (Creswell, 2012). It gives a voice “to those who live experiences no one else could know about directly, asking research questions that encourage reflection and insight rather than assessing performance on tests or other quantitative measures emphasized in traditional quantitative research” (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012, p. 9).

Since the current study explored student motivation from the perspectives of the respondents, thereby asking for their “perceptions,” qualitative research was best suited. In particular, the case study form of ethnographic research design was used to answer the research questions. Of case studies, Yin (2004) asserts that they are utilized because of a desire to understand complex social phenomena. Merriam (2009) adds, “Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive” (p. 39).

This study was conducted in four middle schools within one urban New Jersey school district. Participants were core teachers of urban eighth-grade students. The core subject areas included English, mathematics, science, and social studies.

The researcher secured written approval from the school district’s superintendent to conduct the study as well as the administration of the four middle schools. Further, with approval from Seton Hall University’s Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research (IRB),
the study commenced. The researcher met with the administrative teams of both middle schools to describe the study, respond to questions, and request access to teachers during the school day. The schools’ administration agreed and the research progressed. A packet prepared by the researcher, which included the purpose of the research study and research questions, a solicitation letter and consent form was provided to all eighth-grade teachers of the indicated core subject areas. A deadline was set for potential participants to return their consent forms.

Two types of purposeful sampling were utilized for the study: criterion and convenience sampling. Purposeful sampling is a strategy of non-probability sampling and “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). The original lists of potential participants were created by utilizing criterion sampling (Lapan, Quartaroli & Riemer, 2012), which means that all teachers met an established set of criteria. From the list of teachers who returned their forms, convenience sampling was utilized to narrow the sample down to the planned 18 teachers. Convenience sampling is the selection of a sample based merely on convenience, ranging from time or availability of participants (Merriam, 2009). In this study, all returned consent forms were placed in a bag and the researcher randomly selected the 18 teachers.

Semi-structured open-ended questions were developed after a careful survey of relevant research and the study’s conceptual framework. The semi-structured approach is noted as the most important form of interviewing in case study research for its flexibility and the richness in data that it produces (Gillham, 2000). Prior to commencing the interviews, the questions were evaluated by a jury of highly qualified middle school teachers as well the dissertation advisor.
and committee members. The committee reviewed for question relevancy, flaws, and limitations, among other things; and the researcher made all revisions based on the feedback. The semi-structured approach to questioning allows for respondents to provide additional information which may not be addressed by the selected questions.

Interviews were conducted primarily on the school premises at a time that was convenient for teachers and permitted by school administration. The location of interviews was chosen to reflect a comfortable and private space where each teacher participant could feel free to share his or her thoughts. This included the school’s library/media center, conference room, and vacant classroom. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed to ensure validity. The recordings are secured in a locked cabinet within the researcher’s home and will be systematically destroyed after three years of the study’s completion.

Confidentiality was maintained for all teacher participants by ensuring that no real names were used throughout the dissertation document. Instead, numbers represented each teacher participant; for example, Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and so on.

From the transcribed interview text, the researcher identified themes and presented the findings qualitatively to answer the research questions.

**Conceptual Framework**

There is no shortage of theories that attempt to explain how and why people are motivated to achieve a goal. Theories, including Herzberg’s (1959) two-factor theory, McClelland’s (1961) achievement motivation theory, and Locke’s (1968) goal-setting theory, among others, present plausible ideas surrounding motivation. However, for the purpose of this study, a chosen conceptual framework must consider the uniqueness of the at-risk population
under study, specifically their life circumstance and how it translates to a propensity to struggle academically. We find such consideration in the work of Abraham Maslow—later simplified by Alderer (1969)—who advanced a humanistic perspective on motivation. In his 1943 article, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” Maslow suggested that people are motivated by certain categories of needs. These needs are organized hierarchically with those of highest priority falling on the bottom of the hierarchy. Maslow noted that only when the basic needs are satisfied would a person aspire to meet higher needs. The five categories include physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization.

On the physiological level, people's basic needs are in play, including a need for food, shelter, and sleep. In terms of safety, the need to feel protected from harm in all aspects of one's life is emphasized. This might involve safety through law and order, protection from the elements, and a sense of stability, among others. Further, Maslow highlighted the love and belonging needs, which include maintaining meaningful and affectionate relationships with people in general. Higher still is the need for esteem. This category of needs relates to a desire for recognition, respect, appreciation, and achievement. At the top of the hierarchy is the need for self-actualization. Maslow explained that to reach actualization, one would need to essentially become all that one hopes to be, therefore meeting one’s fullest potential.

It is noted that for the at-risk student population, needs become an important theme. More specifically, at-risk students face challenging barriers to satisfying basic needs, as they may be products of economically disadvantaged communities and families. In this way, motivation for academic achievement, which aligns with Maslow’s esteem needs, would not be present unless lower and more basic needs are met.
Significance of the Study

This study sought to understand the motivation of urban eighth-grade students who are at-risk for academic failure from the perception of teachers. It is through such an understanding that educators can begin to bridge the gap in at-risk student achievement and chart a course towards ensuring their success. The research suggests that motivation is key to learning for the at-risk student (Dicintio & Gee, 1999; Cardetti & McKenna, 2011). Even more, it is qualitative studies, like the present one, which articulate the real perceptions of teachers who have worked with at-risk students and set context for creation of an effective strategy. Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer (2012), in discussing qualitative studies, emphasize that “this approach has significant evaluative and intervention-oriented benefits for researchers, study participants, and the communities that constitute the focus of the research (p. 101). Thus, the importance of the study is in the perception of teachers of eighth-grade at-risk students from an urban school district regarding the classroom factors that facilitate or inhibit at-risk student motivation to excel academically. It is intended that these findings, both in teachers’ perceptions as well as in the included literature review of research, may provide a framework for teachers, school leaders, and parents of at-risk students in urban school districts to better understand the experiences of this group and target the approaches, strategies, and other supports to better meet the needs of urban at-risk students.

Limitations of the Study

The study is affected by the following limitations:

1. The small sample size of respondents
2. The perceptions, potential personal biases, and experiences of teachers of urban eighth-grade at-risk students in one New Jersey school district.

3. Results may not be applicable to other schools.

4. Potential researcher bias

**Delimitations of the Study**

This study has many delimitations. These include the following:

1. While students who are at-risk for academic failure can be found in any geographical location, the researcher selected an urban school district in Essex County, New Jersey.

2. The researcher excluded teachers of students with disabilities from the study since students with this classification receive special services that may not be available to regular education students.

3. Participants are teachers of urban eighth-grade at-risk students. It is noted that teachers of students on other grade levels who fit the at-risk classification can offer valuable insight on the research questions; however, the researcher narrowed the scope of the research to reflect the indicated grade level.

4. The study is limited to the researcher’s chosen methodology.

5. The study is limited to the specific research questions.

6. The study is further limited to the researcher’s analyses of participants’ responses.
**Definition of Terms**

*At-risk* - In this study, the term *at-risk* is used to refer to “students who struggle academically” as determined by performance on the state assessment.

*Motivation* - In this study, the term *motivation* is defined according to Webster (2001) as “a force or influence that causes someone to do something.”

*Facilitate Motivation* - For the purpose of this study, the term *facilitate motivation* is used to mean “increasing the desire or willingness to do something.”

*Inhibit Motivation* - For the purpose of this study, the term *inhibit motivation* is used to mean, “hinder or restrain desire or willingness to something.”

*Classroom Factors* - For the purpose of this study, classroom factors relate to the “classroom environment and teacher instructional practice.”

**Organization of the Study**

The study is organized into five chapters. The first chapter provides the research problem and purpose for the study. The second provides the literature surrounding the research problem. Chapter III discusses the specific research methodology used to answer the research questions. The fourth chapter presents and analyzes the research findings. Finally, the fifth chapter summarizes the study and offers conclusions as well as recommendations for further study.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Who Are At-risk Students?

Generally, students who have failed or experienced difficulty academically are considered at risk (Alfassi, 2003). However, this alone does not tell the full story of at-risk students. To begin this discussion, we look to Mason (2003), who explains that students who have made poor choices, which have had a negative impact on their education, are also considered at-risk. In many cases, at-risk students do not have adequate parental support and maintain an overall low academic self-concept, which creates the situation of academic struggle and increased risk of dropping out of school (Mason, 2013). When students drop out of school, they “struggle to make ends meet because they must take lower-paying jobs, sometimes working two jobs in order to pay their bills” (Mason, 2013, p. 6).

Providing a deeper understanding of the characteristics of at-risk students, Pogrow (1990) notes the following:

They do not know what it means to work with ideas. They rarely form the elaborate linkages among the things they have learned that are critical for retention and problem-solving. They do not readily generalize, hypothesize, or predict—or even recognize that they are supposed to. They have no idea how to manipulate the types of knowledge used in school, and many do not seem aware that anything represented by symbols can be understood. (p. 62)

Such difficulty in mastering important skills academically results in not just failing grades but other issues related to discipline. Menzer and Hampel (2009) observe such issues in a
study which examined the characteristics of 155 students who dropped out of a Delaware high school in their senior year during a three-year period. They found that these students fit the at-risk student profile. The majority received C’s, D’s, and F grades—with the failing grade more often being earned in the areas of mathematics and English. Such students had discipline referrals that were twice as many as their graduating peers and suspensions that nearly tripled that of graduates. Additionally, of the 155 non-graduating seniors, the researchers note the following characteristics: 52% were male; 51% Black; 16% in special education; 37% were eligible for free/reduced price lunch; 58% had repeated a year; and the days absent during the senior years was 35.4 (Menzer & Hampel, 2009).

Even more, through a process involving interviews of various groups, including the non-graduates, a review of information from the intervention team, observation, and informal conversations within the school, Menzer and Hampel (2009) identified four main types of non-graduating seniors: (a) the lackadaisical, who despite encouragement and support from parents, teachers, and administrators, employed a lazy and listless attitude towards their academics, making excuses for their failures; (b) the overwhelmed, whose personal hardships challenged completion of school; (c) the struggler, who consistently had difficulty with the work but managed to get enough credits to become seniors; and (d) the surprised, who maintained good grades but failed a course at the end of their senior year (p. 661).

In the same direction, Solberg, Caristrom, Howard, and Jones (2007) conducted a study with 789 minority students from an urban high school to distinguish their degrees of academic risk based on their level of self-efficacy and internal motivation, their perceived family support and connections with teachers and peers, as well as environmental challenges such as exposure
to violence. Six groups of students were identified, five of which were noted to be at risk, including those in the most vulnerable, vulnerable, disengaged, resilient, and moderately resilient groups. The final group was identified as not at risk. Not surprising, the results showed that students who were designated *most vulnerable* and *vulnerable* had an overall lower level of self-efficacy and internal motivation as well as less family support and connections with teachers and peers. Both groups reported the lowest retention when compared to other groups. For those in the most vulnerable group, the lowest grades, compared to other groups, were reported. The areas in which students in both groups reported overall higher numbers was in their exposure to violence.

Solberg, Caristrom, Howard, and Jones (2007) specifically highlight the disengaged groups, noting that they “recorded significantly lower individual and relational factors, yet were not found to differ significantly from youth in the other groups with respect to retention in school, and these youth in the disengaged group only differed significantly on grades when compared with youth in the not-at-risk group” (pp. 322-323). As it pertains to those deemed *resilient* or *moderately resilient* and not-at-risk, relatively higher levels of self-efficacy, motivation, family support, and teacher and peer connections were reported when compared to the other groups. However, when it came to stress, those in the resilient group reported higher levels compared to those deemed not at risk. Moreover, the resilient groups reported lower grades and poorer health in comparison to the not-at-risk group.

Providing the bridge to further discussion about at-risk students and how to effectively respond to their needs, Dicintio and Gee (1999) make the point that, often, at-risk students face “impoverished learning environments” (p. 231). Such students, who they assert can act defiantly, show disrespect and aggression, and have a disinterest in school, are victims of learning
environments that “perpetuate academic difficulties” (p. 231). These kinds of learning environments, argue Dicintio and Gee (1999), are known for providing instruction that remediates and is compensatory, thereby addressing only lower-level skills. Dicintio and Gee (1999) further note the following:

Because basic skills underlie advanced skills, or so traditional philosophy espouses, basic instructional tasks must precede advanced instructional tasks. Unfortunately, this approach puts our disadvantaged students at an even greater risk by denying them access to advanced knowledge and skills. The argument made, then, is that at-risk adolescents are unmotivated to learn because the tasks they are asked to complete are not motivating for them. (p. 231)

Considering this, Dicintio and Gee (1999) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between the quality of instructional tasks to students’ level of motivation. What they found was a significant association between student motivation and the level of control students felt they had over their learning. “Students reported being more involved and more competent when they perceived greater control over decisions and choices; conversely, they reported being less bored, less confused, and less interested in doing something else (p. 234). Additionally, in the area of the degree of challenge of instructional tasks, students reported that they felt more confused and less competent when the challenge was high. Dicintio and Gee (1999) provide two explanations for such feelings:

First, these students come from academically depleted environments. Exposure to challenging tasks, requiring higher-order thinking skills, could easily invoke confusion and low efficacy beliefs. Second, we are unsure what the meaning of “challenge” is to
these students. Is a challenging task one that is too hard and “unsolvable” or is a challenging task one that is optimal in its difficulty? (p. 234).

With these findings, Dicintio and Gee (1999) offer that the optimal learning environment for at-risk students is one that is motivationally adaptive and provides students with control over their learning. They add, “More so than traditional students, at-risk students need to learn the skills of self-determination and adaptive motivation in school learning—characteristics that cannot be imparted through motivational practices that control and coerce students” (p. 235).

Providing additional support for the inability of tutoring and remediation programs to effect significant changes in at-risk students’ academic performance, Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2009), in a study, examined students’ self-reported perceptions of their motivations and role models in a school dropout-prevention program. The program offered tutoring, personal development, summer enrichment, and parental involvement. The results showed that tutoring proved not to be an “effective method of improving attitudes toward staying in school, or in actually producing better achievement outcomes via GPA,” explaining that it “may be that GPA is not the best indicator of achievement, because it involves so many other behavioral factors such as motivation, homework completion, class participation, attendance, and student-teacher relationships” (p. 355). Additional results showed a strong need to provide assistance to students in the area of using their motivation to increase academic performance, understanding the link between their performance in high school and its relationship to their post-high school academic career and planning for their future, which includes setting realistic career goals (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009). In the area of parental involvement, Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2009) advise the following:
Schools would likely benefit from developing and implementing programs or even low technology efforts to educate and involve parents regarding their potential as role models. This could be done through home-school notes, in-service presentations, asking parents to come to school to talk about their careers with students, or any number of options; but in any case, the ultimate goal is for schools to persist in the often challenging task of obtaining parental buy in and participation. (p. 355)

Making a strong point about the perception of at-risk students and how to begin to respond to their needs, Nelson and Sneller (2011) assert the following:

When educators describe youth as being "at risk," those students appear to have some internal dysfunction that evokes hopelessness and a moral judgment about them. If we substitute the statement that some youth show "at-risk behaviors," we must examine to whom those behaviors are shown, under what circumstances, and what effect those behaviors have. When we do this, we open up the possibility that at-risk youth are part of a system that is ultimately as responsible for those risky behaviors as the youth themselves. If the system is reciprocal and ultimately responsible for how we think about those at-risk behaviors in youth, there is a clear possibility for different thinking—thinking that is helpful and hopeful for our youth. (p.17)

Responding to the Needs of At-risk Students

Considering the numerous barriers to achievement that at-risk students face, including lack of parental support, low self-efficacy and motivation, and limited positive relationships with peers and teachers (Solberg, Caristrom, Howard, & Jones, 2007), it becomes important to apply various forms of research-based interventions to effect positive change in this group. Thus, if
remediation and tutoring efforts have proven to be ineffective in inspiring change in at-risk students’ level of motivation and student achievement (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009; Dicintio & Gee, 1999), then what are effective ways to reach this group?

A wealth of current research suggests that establishing relationships with teachers and other caring adults is essential to ensuring the success of at-risk students (Powell & Marshall, 2011). To begin to explore this idea, we look to Holloway and Salinitri (2010), who found support for this insight as they explored the relationship between mentors and at-risk students. The study revealed that in addition to at-risk students feeling that they learned from watching their mentors, they also saw mentors as potential confidantes. Thus, student success is “redefined to focus not only on academic skill development but also on social engagement within the broader school culture (Holloway & Salinitri, 2010, p. 394).

Another supporting study was conducted by Flores and Kaylor (2007), who noted how the direct instruction approach, which emphasizes small groups and face-to-face instruction, increases student performance for students at risk for failing math. They found that students’ skills improved as a result of their participation in the program, achieving at least 90% accuracy on independent activities. Moreover, student motivation increased as students reported positive feelings towards the program and surprise by their achievement.

In a similar way, it has been found that teachers play a significant role in inspiring high levels of intrinsic motivation in their students (Blackburn & Armstrong, 2011; Lam, Cheng, & Ma, 2009; Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009; Yin-kum, 2008). Intrinsic motivation, as defined by Blackburn and Armstrong (2011), is a sense of “working toward something simply because we want to or because we see the value in the accomplishment” (p. 42). Blackburn and Armstrong
(2011) emphasize that there are two key elements to intrinsic motivation: value and success. They assert “if we tap into students’ perceptions of value and feelings of success, we can help them be more motivated” (p. 42). Students see value when they are connecting learning to their personal lives. They experience success when they understand and are able to engage new content and engage in self-reflection (Blackburn & Armstrong, 2011, p. 42). Thus, it becomes important for educators to be aware of this role and provide the kinds of learning experiences that “encourages students to express their own ideas, freely participate in discussions, freely compare and contrast ideas, and be involved in discussions among themselves” (Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009, p. 25).

This argument to provide meaningful instruction is further advanced by Yin-Kum (2008), who notes a strong relationship between teacher instructional practices and student motivation. The study explored the relationship between extrinsic motivation, home literacy, classroom instructional practices, and reading proficiency in second-grade students. Yin-Kum (2008) found a slight association between home literacy and reading proficiency and a slightly negative association between children’s extrinsic motivation and reading proficiency. Children who reported receiving extrinsic rewards like prizes for reading were found to have the worst performance in reading comprehension. On the other hand, teacher instructional practices, as perceived by students and parents, were found to have the greatest impact on reading comprehension scores. Thus, when “teachers adopt various teaching approaches to arouse the children’s interest and curiosity, children’s reading proficiency is improved” (Yin-Kum, 2008, p. 48). Moreover, the findings show that “younger children can also be motivated to read by
teachers who stimulate their curiosity, encourage their decision making, and acknowledge their efforts” (Yin-Kum, 2008, p. 48).

Adding to the discussion, Knesting (2008) notes that increasing motivation in this group does not always require a great deal of resources from teachers; instead, it is often simple things such as being polite and showing students respect in the classroom that contribute to more engagement by students. Moreover, Knesting (2008) found that students “responded to teachers who asked for their opinions and then listened to their answers, and developed supportive relationships with those who maintained high expectations for them and then stayed on their backs as they worked to achieve their goals” (p. 8). Additionally, Cardetti and McKenna (2011) found that students are motivated in many ways. They classified these motivations into the following themes: “intrinsic satisfaction, bribery, competition, fear and the adrenaline surge, learning through sharing and approval from family and peers” (p. 355). Considering all of the ways that students become motivated, Cardetti and McKenna (2011) advise that “the best that instructors can do is recognize their students’ motivational orientations and carefully tailor their teaching to the different styles of their students” (p. 362).

Lam, Cheng, and Ma (2009), in a study, note both a direct and indirect association between teacher and student intrinsic motivation. Three important findings were derived: (a) “Teacher intrinsic motivation was associated positively with students’ perceptions of instructional support. Thus, when teachers reported higher intrinsic motivation in project-based learning, their students would perceive more instructional support during the instructional process;” (b) “Students’ perceptions of instructional support were associated positively with their intrinsic motivation. When students perceived more instructional support from their teachers,
they would report higher intrinsic motivation in project-based learning;” In addition, (c) “The zero-order correlation between teacher and student intrinsic motivation attenuated significantly when instructional support was taken into consideration” (p. 574). Moreover, Lam, Cheng, and Ma (2009) assert that this strong correlation between teacher intrinsic and student intrinsic motivation can be understood in terms of both teacher instructional practices and modeling. They explain that students “might have picked up clues on the inherent enjoyment of project-based learning by observing their intrinsically motivated teachers” (p. 576).

In a different way, although still making a strong point for the role of teacher instructional practices in increasing student motivation, Kohn (2010) stresses that teachers cannot instill intrinsic motivation; they can, however, support or revive it. Kohn (2010) further emphasizes that the one sure thing that teachers have the ability to do, with respect to student motivation, is destroy it. He identifies seven things that teachers do to effectively destroy student motivation towards reading. These include quantifying reading assignments, making students write reports, isolating them, focusing on skills, offering incentives, preparing students for tests, and restricting student choices. Instead, to support and revive student motivation, educators can “work with students to create a classroom culture, a climate, a curriculum that will nourish and sustain the fundamental inclinations that everyone starts out with: to make sense of oneself and the world, to become increasingly competent at tasks that are regarded as consequential, to connect with (and express oneself to) other people” (Kohn, 2010, p. 16).

Adding to Kohn (2010) and moving the discussion to focus on both instructing and assessing students—particularly those at risk, we refer to Rieg (2007), who explains the need for teachers to employ flexibility in the instruction and evaluation of at-risk students:
The middle school years are a pivotal period in adolescents' lives, and assessment plays a critical role in how adolescents perceive themselves and their peers during those middle school years. All children, including those at-risk, can and do learn; therefore, it is a charge of our teachers to be flexible in the methods of instructing and evaluating children to meet the needs of every individual within the schools. (p. 214)

Moreover, Rieg (2007) conducted a study which investigated the perceptions of teachers and at-risk students on the effectiveness and level of use of various classroom assessments and assessment-related strategies. Results showed that there were significant differences in what teachers and students perceived as being effective assessments and assessment strategies as well as the frequency of use of such assessments and strategies. Moreover, based on the results, Rieg (2007) concludes that “teachers are not using many of the assessments and assessment-related strategies they perceive to be effective” (p. 219). Additionally, it was found that students did not understand the benefit of strategies which can assist them in preparing for tests, including prior knowledge of areas being tested, rubrics, checklists—a situation that Rieg (2007) considers may be responsible for why so many students are failing and are at risk. Rieg (2007) offers the following suggestion for approaching assessment with at-risk students:

Teachers could help motivate their students by helping them prepare for tests and assessments by providing tutors, study skills lessons, non-graded tests and quizzes, and advanced organizers. The teachers surveyed perceived these strategies to be effective but many of the teachers were not using these practices in their classrooms. (p. 219)
Effective Research-based Strategies and Programs for At-risk Students

The insight that instructional practices should be relevant to students’ lives and arouse children’s interest is well noted in research (Solberg, Caristrom, Howard, & Jones, 2007; Knesting, 2008; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009; Holloway & Salinitri, 2010). What follows are just a few of many research-based approaches that can be implemented in an effort to effect positive change in the at-risk student population; these include a learning-centered structured academic program, curriculum integration, service learning, workshops, and technology integration (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Effective Instructional Approaches for At-risk Students. This figure presents a list of instructional approaches, which have the potential to effect positive change in the academic performance of at-risk students.
Learning-Centered Structured Academic Program

Alfassi (2003), in a study which investigated the effectiveness of a learning-centered structured academic program with high school students at risk for dropping out of school, noted increases in academic performance in areas of mathematics and English and higher self-efficacy with such students. All students in the program were enrolled in an alternative high school after dropping out of the regular school setting. The program’s rationale, as Alfassi (2003) states, is that “learning difficulties are mainly a result of obstacles rather than lack of ability” (p. 32).

Further, the goal of the program was “to decrease dropout rate by bringing a significant improvement in students’ learning achievements, academic confidence, and motivation.” Alfassi (2003) specifies the following operational practices of the program: (a) individualized educational programs (IEPs), which provide for student choice and flexible scheduling; (b) a modular program which includes detailed syllabi; (c) entrance to program/level based on academic skills/competencies; (d) movement to the next grade once requirements have been completed and a formal and recognized diploma has been received; (e) adapted to student needs and interests and relies on a close relationship between teacher and students; (f) non-competitive, thereby allowing students to advance at their own pace. Furthermore, Alfassi (2003) explains that the “structured and modular nature of the academic program gives students an opportunity to reintegrate into the regular school system” (p. 32). Figure 2 provides a visual representation of all operation components of the learning-centered structured academic program.
Figure 2. Components of Learning-centered Structured Academic Program. This figure shows the components of a structured academic program credited for improved student achievement and self-efficacy.

Specifically, the study showed that students at risk who participate in a structured academic program achieved on average a score of 70% on achievement tests compared to students in conventional remedial programs who scored 22% to 54% (Alfassi, 2003). These results, argues Alfassi (2003), show that “learner-centered academic structured programs are a viable form of school intervention for students at academic risk whose self-efficacy beliefs seem low and debilitating” (p. 38). Additionally, the researcher adds that “teaching students to set their own proximal goals, giving frequent feedback to students on performance, and providing a clear standard against which students can gauge their progress all positively affect academic self-efficacy and achievement” (Alfassi, 2003, p. 38).
**Curriculum integration.** MacMath, Roberts, Wallace, and Xiaohong (2010), in a study, reveal potential benefits in learning and self-efficacy for at-risk students who were involved in curriculum integration—which they define as combining subject areas or disciplines. MacMath, Roberts, Wallace, and Xiaohong (2010) explain that the approach of parallel structures was used where concepts were reinforced in two separate classrooms. This repetition and reinforcement, argue MacMath, Roberts, Wallace, and Xiaohong (2010), is a valuable approach since students were not only “able to retain more information than expected, they were also able to apply that knowledge in their classes” (p. 92). The researchers noted that curriculum integration led to increases in student motivation and their student perception that learning was relevant to their lives. Three applicable insights for working with at-risk students were derived from the study: (a) combining disciplines resulted in students feeling that their problem-solving activities reflected real world problems, thus being more relevant to their personal lives; (b) higher levels of academic success were achieved compared to engagement with other units; and (c) students experienced feelings of self-efficacy when they were able to use their learning in one class to respond to questions and make connections in another (p. 93). MacMath, Roberts, Wallace, and Xiaohong (2010) further assert that when “students have repeatedly experienced academic failure, it is important for teachers to provide activities that challenge these negative experiences (p.93). Curriculum integration, thus, becomes an opportunity for such students to engage positive learning experiences.

**Service learning.** According to Nelson and Sneller (2011), service-learning is a type of experiential learning which “capitalizes on students' positive assets, their potential, and the possibilities therein” (p. 14). It provides at-risk students an opportunity to discuss their concerns
and interests, problem-solve, and engage in decision making as they develop their identities—a process which is supported by responsible adults (Nelson & Sneller, 2011). The researchers emphasize that not only is service learning a way to reshape the educator’s view about at-risk students, it can be an effective instructional strategy for this population. They write as follows:

The reconceptualization of disaffected youth as social and political change agents through service-learning empowers the students and the system in a reciprocal fashion. The optimistic belief that adolescents who are described as at risk have the potential to change and then designing programs based on that belief is a core assumption of service-learning programs for at-risk youth. Service-learning can be a powerful educational strategy in working with youth, particularly those who are considered at risk. (p. 14)

Nelson and Sneller (2011) provided examples of service-learning projects from the Travis County Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program in Austin, Texas, and the Georgetown Discipline Alternative Education Program (known as the GAP) in Georgetown, Texas, to assist educators in creating a template for their own service-learning program. One example featured a service-learning project on animal welfare, where students chose to focus on helping animals. Guided by the eight service-learning standards and under the direction of an instructor, the students began implementation of the project over an entire semester. As a team, their experiences included writing an eight-page persuasive letter, volunteering at the animal shelter, observing the spaying and neutering process at a university clinic, obtaining and studying facts related to areas where stray animals are most often found, developing an advertisement, greeting/communicating with diverse people, employing math through calculations and
preparation of charts, and regularly reflecting in their journals about their experiences—reflections which positively represented such experiences.

Nelson and Sneller (2011) emphasize that instead of viewing such students as “trouble-makers and unmotivated, passive learners, the teachers at this school opened up new possibilities for them through a service-learning project that the students considered, designed, reflected upon, and monitored (p. 17). As a closing point, they further assert the following:

Youth in trouble cannot be ignored. Service-learning programs allow us to harness the tremendous capacity of youth to change as they learn about serving the world. As with all other educational programs, service-learning provides the greatest impact on student success and behavioral changes when the projects adhere to the highest standards. Now that researchers have delineated the standards that produce the best programs, it is incumbent upon educators to learn these standards and ensure that they are incorporated into service-learning programs in order to produce hopeful futures for troubled youth. (p. 17)

**Workshops.** Rukavina, Zivic-Butorac, Ledic, Milotic, and Jurdana-Sepic (2012) present survey results which show strong support for the use of workshops, as a form of active class participation, to teach science and mathematics—an approach which they assert is more acceptable to students than traditional methods. The survey investigated the level of interest and motivation immediately following 40 workshops for a total of 1,240 participating students between the ages of 10 and 14. The researchers explain that the “workshops were designed in order to encourage active engagement in classwork and a deeper approach to learning stemming from meaningful involvement in a real problem related to everyday life” (p. 6).
The results supported such design, as students indicated that they eagerly accepted learning in the workshop form and valued being able to engage the demonstration and application of learning. Specifically, the researchers report highest student ratings in the areas of experiments and practical work with 16% of students stating that they enjoyed all aspects of the workshop. Additional results showed that immediately following the end of the workshops, the majority of the students (3/4) indicated a preference for physics and mathematics in comparison to other subjects. According to Rukavina, Zuvic-Butorac, Ledic, Milotic, and Jurdana-Sepic (2012), this was surprising, considering that these subject areas are typically ones students complain about, but also suggested that such results were influenced by the students’ direct participation in the workshop. Thus, the researchers posit, “The fact that they express positive attitudes towards the subjects immediately after experiencing a different teaching approach supports the conclusion that the approach is a key factor in motivating and developing interest in science and mathematics” (p. 17).

The findings indicate that 76% of students express an opinion that this kind of class performance makes the learning process better and easier, while 68% of the students would like this type of approach in regular lessons as well. The comments on the survey sheets indicate that students find demonstrations, experiments, and applied calculations extremely important, as these activities evidently provide good context for acquiring new concepts. To this end, Rukavina, Zuvic-Butorac, Ledic, Milotic, and Jurdana-Sepic (2012) emphasize that the workshop approach “provides better conditions for learning science and mathematics, especially in stimulating students to develop positive attitudes towards the subjects” (p. 17). Thus,
including elements of such classroom activities more often in lessons is advised (Rukavina, Zuvic-Butorac, Ledic, Milotic, and Jurdana-Sepic, 2012).

**Technology integration.** Integrating technology into curricula in an effort to improve student performance continues to be an approach that school systems use. However, in many cases, the money being spent on technology is not reflected in students’ performance, specifically with the at-risk population (Pogrow, 1990). The question then becomes how to effectively use technology to inspire positive outcomes in the at-risk population. Pogrow (1990) provides a response to this very question:

Computers thus provide a great vehicle for developing creative and sophisticated curriculums and pedagogical practices. But we have to stop viewing computers as deliverers of instruction. Technologists must go beyond mere promotion, paying only lip service to pedagogy, and curriculum specialists must assert their knowledge of teaching. We must all, in short, combine our points of view if we are to best apply the power of technology, new theories of cognition, and learning traditions from other disciplines, cultures, and art forms. And we must recognize that a roundabout but sophisticated approach to using technology may improve the learning of at-risk students much more than direct but simplistic routes (p. 65).

One such sophisticated approach to using technology with at-risk students is offered by Nolan, Preston, and Finkelstein (2012), who describe a blended learning technology program (called Digital Literacies) that has shown potential in helping at-risk students achieve academic success—as evidenced by the positive feedback from students who have completed the program. Nolan, Preston, and Finkelstein (2012) explain that the students who enroll in the program need
to be convinced that their active engagement is worthwhile, as previous academic experiences inspired only disappointment. Thus, such students need to see relevance in learning as well as the opportunity for success (Nolan, Preston & Finkelstein, 2012).

Blended learning offers a “combination of face-to-face and online learning that represents a promising application of technology for deep learning and engagement” (Nolan, Preston, & Finkelstein, 2012, p. 43). It “represents a pedagogy-driven strategy to change the nature of students’ educational experience and to build academic and personal habits and skills students need to be lifelong active learners and digital citizens” (Nolan, Preston, & Finkelstein, 2012, pp. 43-44). Such skills include digital literacy, self-regulation and independence, and communication and collaboration (Nolan, Preston, & Finkelstein, 2012). Additionally, this approach is student-centered, thereby ensuring that students are actively participating in their learning instead of merely receiving content. Student performance tasks and formative assessment allows teachers to have frequent evidence of students’ learning and provides students with the feedback they need to celebrate their achievements. Moreover, students have flexibility, which can include self-pacing and moving ahead when targeted skills are met. The other student-centered advantage of this program is “anytime learning,” which allows students the opportunity to access the course at any time of the day (Nolan, Preston, & Finkelstein, 2012).

Among the major components of the program, the increased interaction between teachers and students is noted in the online environment. The program requires that each student has access to his/her individual computer and provides an attractive “web-based environment that supports students’ exploration of content, collaboration with other students, and the creation and sharing of new material” (Nolan, Preston, & Finkelstein, 2012, p. 45). Furthermore, students are
rewarded with points and badges as they complete activities in the areas of digital citizenship, college and career exploration, personal financial literacy, and arts and culture.

**Implications for Instructional Practice and Student Achievement**

For the at-risk student population, research has shown that instruction must be motivating if the anticipated outcome is student achievement. Instruction is motivating when it is relevant to students’ personal lives, allows active participation in learning, and provides opportunity for students to achieve academic success. Among the implications for such insights, examining the curriculum and the curriculum developmental process becomes critical to ensuring that effective instructional approaches are employed with this population. Bulach (1978) states that “maximizing the capacity of a school system to achieve its instructional goals is one of the major purposes of curriculum development,” adding that “a second purpose is the establishment of new goals and a mechanism to accomplish them” (p. 308). In this way, curriculum development for at-risk students requires, among other things, a keen understanding of their unique needs as well as the realities of the community in which they are members. It is this knowledge coupled with a school district’s response that determines the level of success of the curriculum and, by extension, of the instructional program.

Considering this important role, planning curriculum for at-risk students should be approached strategically. McNeil (2009) suggests, “Having curriculum goals chosen by the largest number of people involved in an educational enterprise is still the best general principle” (p. 105). Here he speaks of not only those on the instructional “level of remoteness” from learners—like teachers—but also those on the societal (school boards, federal agencies, etc.), institutional (administrators and faculty groups), and personal (the student) levels (p. 106). It is
this representation of voices in the curriculum decision-making process that ensures the relevance of instruction and meaningful learning for students. Thus, curriculum becomes an all-encompassing guide that effectively prepares at-risk students to function on diverse levels. At-risk students from such a curriculum stand to gain a sense of worth as they play a role in creating their own learning experiences. Moreover, they are set up for success in the real world, since learning reflects the competencies required to effectively compete in this environment.

Additionally, it is important to note that the curriculum should not be stagnant but be a dynamic tool—ready to offer an appropriate response to changes in society and in the circumstance of children. This way, the teaching and the learning process remains applicable to the needs of students. As McNeil (2009) explains, need in the context of curriculum is a “condition in which a discrepancy exists between an acceptable state of learner achievement or attitude and an observed learner state” (p. 113). Thus, such flexibility in curriculum requires a continuous process of needs assessment in which changing needs drive changes in curriculum objectives and goals.

**Implications for Education Policy**

It takes just a quick inspection of education today to observe a system facing tremendous challenge. Tension and much debate surround at-risk students and how to effectively respond to their needs. Areas that often inspire the most significant quarrel include high-stakes standardized testing and education funding, specifically for the at-risk student population. The education system must reconcile these issues and create research-based policies, which appropriately respond to the needs of at-risk students.
When it comes to standardized testing, opponents argue that teachers and students are struggling. Accountability based on standardized test scores is creating the practice of teaching to the test and hindering teacher professional efficacy, motivation, and imagination (Gay, 2007). “There is no time, desire or incentive to teach through their own ingenuity and initiative. For them teaching has become a burden to bear and a very unrewarding chore” (Gay, 2007, p. 281).

To improve learning, Bell (2012) asserts that it takes “a holistic evaluation of how our schools are doing, given the myriad academic and social expectations we have for them. Moreover, it takes meaningful intervention—not silver bullets—to make struggling schools better and good schools great” (p.26).

In terms of funding, Cummings (2002) posits that it is the most fundamental civil right of every child to receive a quality education. Thus, approaches to education funding, specifically for those in disadvantaged communities, should ensure that each student receives the appropriate resources to gain a quality education. In this way, the approach of equity instead of equality in funding education serves as a fair and appropriate response to the disparities that exist in life circumstance and learning challenges of students from poor districts, who are at risk for academic failure, compared to those from wealthy ones. These disparities, many have argued, necessitate that more money per child be given to poor districts to ensure a high-quality education which represents a starting point in bridging the achievement gap for such at-risk students. However, what remains unclear and therefore adds fuel to the education funding debate is the cost to provide a high-quality education. Brimley, Verstegen, and Garfield (2012), in discussion of this point, accurately emphasize that the “difficulty of solving the cost-quality
problem in education is increased by the fact that the term *high quality* has not been defined in ways that are measurable and acceptable to all concerned” (p. 20).

Thus, without consensus by all stakeholders on how to effectively measure high quality education, education policy will continue to be influenced by the highly criticized approach of test scores on standardized tests as a main indicator of quality. This form of measurement weakens the argument for equity in education funding and puts at-risk students at a significant disadvantage, since data consistently shows that children in these school districts, despite additional state and federal funds, perform poorly on standardized tests. Moreover, the kinds of policy decision making derived from defining quality education in these terms is typically cutbacks in funding to poor district, which results in teacher layoffs and loss of valuable programs aimed at helping this population achieve higher success academically. Further describing this issue, Cummings (2002) asserts, “Too often, shortchanging low-income students has also meant that minority students have not received the quality education that will empower them” (p. A7).

The reality is that the education playing field is not level, as children from poor communities, who typically are at-risk unlike their wealthy counterparts, face numerous issues that significantly affect their ability to succeed academically and live productive lives. Thus, the uniqueness of this population’s circumstance must be considered in any discussion regarding education funding. In this way, education funding must be equitable. It must be sufficient to meet the needs of disadvantaged children—the need for additional programs, more teachers, smaller classrooms, and more training to help teachers adjust instructional practices to improve the teaching and learning process for these children.
Moreover, our education system must find a better way—in addition to test scores—to evaluate the quality of education. Any other combination of approaches to evaluate quality (teacher observation/evaluation, portfolio work, student motivation) stands to show greater growth in this population’s level of success.

**Implications for School Leadership**

Leadership is a “means for individuals to explore, to understand, to modify, and to articulate their own ethics, and those of other individuals” (Barker, 1997, p. 354). Moreover, Barker (1997) emphasizes that leadership inspires people to “visualize a common *summum bonum* [the ultimate end to be pursued] that in turn comes to be manifested in leadership role expectations, which in turn comes to be symbolized by and attributed to the leader” (p. 354). It is this type of leadership that is needed to truly inspire significant change in the at-risk student population.

Instructional leaders must move beyond merely managing the educational environment to being fully immersed in all aspects of the teaching and learning process—from curriculum development and implementation to ensuring continuous teacher learning. To ensure this, four key areas of competencies, skills, and actions are identified to help the school leader inspire greater success in teachers and students. These include (a) engaging value-added work (Whitaker, 1997; Jackson, 2010), (b) using time more efficiently (Ruder, 2008; Marshall, 2008; O'Donnell & White, 2005), (c) effectively placing students and teachers to inspire positive learning outcomes (Carlyon & Fisher, 2012), and (d) effectively allocating resources to maximize student achievement (Cummings, 2002). Figure 3 provides a visual representation of these key competencies, skills, and actions for school leaders.
**Figure 3.** Leading a Successful School. This figure shows four key areas that school leaders should focus attention to inspire achievement in the at-risk student population.

**Engaging Value-Added Work**

It is important that principals are able to differentiate work that adds value to the teaching and learning process and those that are essentially “waste work.” Whitiker (1997) weighs in on this idea:

Many principals get caught up in day-to-day office operations, discipline, paperwork, and telephone conversation. They fail to realize that school business of major importance is found not in the office, but in the classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, and cafeterias. They
will never have a sense of the school unless they immerse themselves in the atmosphere beyond the office door. (p. 155)

This idea of leaving the office and truly immersing one’s self in the activities of the school is a great starting point for principals to begin to engage in the kind of work that positively impacts the student achievement. Jackson (2010) offers three areas in which principals help to support learning: whole school professional development initiatives, developing high performing teams, and working directly with individual teachers (p. 18). These three activities alone, if carried out with shared purpose and passion, stand to inspire greater teacher and student success.

Using Time More Efficiently

For even the most organized school leader, the sheer number of daily tasks for which he or she is responsible for addressing can be overwhelming (Ruder, 2008). Thus, learning how to manage time and using that time efficiently becomes vitally important to leading inspiring student achievement. As Marshall (2008) warns, principals “can find their time eaten up by things that are urgent but not important” (p. 17). Thus, use of time should reflect a consideration of school needs in respect to improving student performance (O'Donnell and White, 2005). By doing this, principals will “better understand how to be responsive to the most crucial needs of their schools with regard to raising student achievement” (O’Donnell & White, 2005, p. 64).

Effectively placing students and teachers to inspire positive learning outcomes

Another area that school principals must be skilled is in the placement of teacher and students to maximize student achievement. Such placement might involve determining which teachers are appropriate for particular grade levels or particular groups of students. Carlyon and
Fisher (2012), in a study, provide support for this, noting that teacher placement “is one factor of school planning that has a direct impact on teacher, children, and their learning” (p. 68).

**Effectively allocating resources to maximize student achievement**

Significantly important to increasing academic performance in at-risk students is the principal’s ability to effectively allocate resources to improve student achievement. Among the most effective use of resources within a school is the provision of professional development to help teachers strengthen areas of weakness and diversify instructional practices in an effort to meet the individual needs of this student population.

**Summary**

This chapter presented relevant literature surrounding student motivation. It attempted to paint a picture of the at-risk student, distinguishing the unique challenges faced towards achieving a high level of motivation for learning. In addition, research-based strategies that have been shown to increase student motivation were shared and specific implications for instructional practice and student achievement, school leadership, and educational policy were shared. Chapter III presents the methodology used to answer the research questions that guided this study.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study explored the perceptions of teachers of urban eighth-grade at-risk students, in one New Jersey school district, regarding the classroom factors that inspire or inhibit at-risk student motivation to excel academically. A case study research design was utilized to collect qualitative data.

Background

My interest in understanding the circumstance of academically at-risk students grew from over ten years as an educator in an urban school district with a significant population of students who face insurmountable challenges to achieving success academically. Of the ten plus years, a year and a half were spent assisting classroom teachers with lesson modifications and accommodations for inclusion students (students with disabilities who are included in the regular education classroom). The next five years, I provided English language arts/literacy instruction to diverse groups of students including honors, general education, and inclusion students. The remaining time, I have served in other capacities outside of the classroom. As project director for federal school improvement grant funds, I worked with stakeholders on many levels to implement school turnaround principles in an effort to improve student achievement. In my former position as instructional coach for English Language Arts/Literacy, I provided targeted job-embedded professional development and support to teachers on a variety of research-based strategies. During the writing of this dissertation, I am transitioning to the administrative role of Department Chair for English.
In each role, it became evident that addressing the diverse needs of academically at-risk students was difficult for even the most skilled and experienced teachers. Every day was a unique experience, one marked by some successes but many failures. Part of the issue was that there existed no consensus on what good instruction represented for at-risk students. Instructional strategies/approaches that may work one day for one group of at-risk students did not always work other days for the same or other groups of such students. More often than not, such instruction did not result in improved performance on achievement tests. Thus, it was clear that key information about this population and guidance on how to respond instructionally was and continues to be an urgent need for teachers.

It is this level of ambiguity and urgency that inspired me to pursue answers in current research. Moreover, the lack of teacher voices in the available literature surrounding at-risk students is what shaped my decision to gather qualitative data with actual teachers of at-risk students.

**Design**

This study is a qualitative study where the researcher is interested in “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). Qualitative research, according to Creswell (2012), is most appropriate when the variables of a research problem are unknown and need to be explored. Further, such research collects data and analyzes the data to find meaning (Creswell, 2012). It gives a voice “to those who live experiences no one else could know about directly, asking research questions that encourage reflection and insight rather than assessing
performance on tests or other quantitative measures emphasized in traditional quantitative research” (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012, p. 9).

Within the qualitative approach, there are three research designs, each with its own process for collecting and analyzing data: grounded theory, ethnography, and narrative (Creswell, 2012). The ethnographic design allows a researcher the opportunity to describe, analyze, and interpret the shared patterns of a cultural group, drawing on data from a variety of sources. Ethnography consists of three types: the realist ethnography, the case study, and the critical ethnography (Creswell, 2012). For this study, a case study form of ethnographic research design was used to answer the following research questions: (a) What classroom factors, if any, facilitate motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth? (b) What classroom factors, if any, inhibit motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at risk youth? (c) How, if at all, can teachers effectively motivate urban eighth-grade at-risk youth?

Gillham (2000) offers the following in defining a case: “a unit of human activity embedded in the real world; which can only be studied or understood in context; which exists in the here and now; that merges in with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw” (p. 1). A case study can focus on a single case or multiple cases (Gillham, 2000). Case studies are utilized because of a desire to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2014). In addition, case studies can advance our “knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (Yin, 2014, p. 4). Yin (2014) further notes, “A case study allows investigators to focus on a ‘case’ and retain a holistic and real-world perspective” (p. 4).

Merriam (2009) adds, “Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of
data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive” (p. 39). Cases illustrate interactions among variables “recognizing that the same (or even different) variables may configure in different ways in other places or with other populations over time” (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012, p. 84). They further seek to understand the range of variation of “behavioral phenomena or meanings in a population” (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012, p. 84) Case studies, according to Merriam (2009), are characterized as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. Case studies are particularistic when it focuses on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon. Additionally, they are descriptive, as rich description of the phenomenon being explored is produced. The heuristic nature of case studies means that they enhance understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2009). In this study, since the researcher explored teachers of urban at-risk students’ experiences within the classroom, a research design, like the case study design, which allows for the focus on a case or multiple cases, is appropriate.

**Setting**

The study was conducted within four middle schools in a New Jersey urban school district. Based on socioeconomic status, the New Jersey Department of Education classified the district at District Factor Group A, which is the lowest of the eight groupings: A, B, CD, DE, FG, GH, I and J. The district serves over 10,000 students from preschool through high school. Permission was granted to conduct the study in four of the middle schools since each service the study’s target population: eighth-grade students. Interviews were conducted within the school environment at a time and place permitted by administration and convenient for participants. This included free periods during the day and after school. Further, to ensure privacy and a high
level of comfort, interviews took place in the schools’ library/media centers, vacant classrooms, or conference rooms. All schools were noted to have populations that are primarily Black and economically disadvantaged.

**First Middle School**

The first middle school serves students at the eighth-grade level. As it relates to academic achievement, the 2015-2016 Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments noted schoolwide performance at “met or exceeded expectations” was 17% for English Language Arts/Literacy and 7% for mathematics.

**Second Middle School**

The second middle school serves students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. The 2015-2016 Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments noted schoolwide performance at “met or exceeded expectations” was 32% for English Language Arts/Literacy and 14% for mathematics.

**Third School**

The third school is a community school that serves students in Grades 6 through 12. The 2015-2016 Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments noted schoolwide performance at “met or exceeded expectations” was 41% for English Language Arts/Literacy and 14% for mathematics.

**Fourth Middle School**

The fourth school provides an alternative school setting for middle school at-risk students in Grades 6 through 8 who have had unique behavioral challenges within the transitional school setting. Class sizes are smaller to allow more individualized instruction. Furthermore, all
students receive an individual learning program plan (IPP), which consists of academic and behavioral goals to ensure targeted support. In addition, out-of-classroom learning experiences are provided to students both to advance their scope of the world as well as an incentive for positive behavior and student achievement. Demographic and performance information for the school is not available via the New Jersey School Report Card. Instead, students are included in the data of the transitional school in which they were initially placed.

**Population/Sample**

Purposeful sampling was utilized for this study. This strategy of non-probability sampling “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). All participants met the established criteria of teachers of urban eighth-grade students who are deemed at-risk based on poor performance.

Teachers of at-risk students at the eighth-grade level were selected primarily because of the dynamics of the grade level and its students. Eighth-grade students have gained tremendous educational experience. It comes from their immersion in the teaching and learning process throughout elementary school, pre-school for some, as well as two full years of middle school education. The eighth-grade level also represents a transitional time for students, where they can reflect on the past and plan for the future in high school.

Selecting the sample size for the study was approached through a thoughtful process that considered adequacy in depth and breadth of the expected data (Sandelowski, 1995, as cited in Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014). With a smaller sample size of teacher participants who meet the research criteria, the researcher believes that a high level of relevant and valuable
information is provided for analysis (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014). Thus, in consultation with the dissertation’s mentor, the sample size was determined to be 18 teachers.

The 18 participants were selected by employing two types of purposeful sampling: criterion and convenience sampling. The first round of sampling involved criterion sampling. This type of sampling chooses cases based on a set of criteria (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012). Thus, through criterion sampling all teachers of eighth-grade urban students from the four middle schools who met the research criteria were provided an opportunity to participate in the study through individual letters of invitation. From the returned consent forms, a second round of sampling was necessary to narrow the sample size down to the planned 18 for the study. To accomplish this, a less stringent sampling strategy was utilized, convenience sampling. As the name suggests, convenience sampling is the selection of a sample based merely on convenience ranging from time or availability of participants (Merriam, 2009). In employing convenience sampling, the names of all participants who returned consent forms were placed in a bag and the researcher randomly selected the 18 teachers. Table 1 summarizes participant demographic information.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Number of Years Teaching</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>5-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>5-10</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>5-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>5-10</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Instrumentation

The purpose of the study was to explore the motivation of urban eighth-grade students who are at-risk for academic failure. Three research questions guide this inquiry:

1. What classroom factors, if any, facilitate motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth?

2. What classroom factors, if any, inhibit motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth?

3. How, if at all, can teachers effectively motivate urban eighth-grade at-risk youth?
The study utilized an interview protocol, which ranged from 20-35 minutes per interview with semi-structured open-ended questions aligned to each research question to facilitate one-on-one interviews (see Table 1). Interviewing, according to Janesick (2004), is “a meeting of two persons to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic” (p. 72). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) add that interviews gather “descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (p. 95). In particular, the semi-structured approach is noted as the most important form of interviewing in case study research for its flexibility and the richness of data that it produces (Gillham, 2000).

To facilitate effective semi-structured interviews, the researcher was careful to develop interview questions which were open-ended and could yield descriptive data, including stories about the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2009). Further, the semi-structured approach to questioning allows the researcher “to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). Thus, respondents are able to provide additional information which may not be addressed by the selected questions. Table 2 indicates the alignment of the interview questions with the research questions.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Aligned Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What classroom factors, if any, facilitate motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth? | I. Describe a type of classroom that makes struggling students excited about learning. Allow your senses to guide you.  
• What do you see, hear, feel, etc.?  
II. Reflect and describe a learning experience that was enjoyable for struggling students.  
• What were you doing?  
• What were the struggling students doing?  
• What were his/her peers doing? |
III. Share your thoughts and feelings on the following. Specifically, discuss how motivated, if at all, your students were for learning:
- Recognition and Rewards - Students receive praise and/or gifts for successfully completing a task.
- Choice in Learning - Students are encouraged to have choice on what is, and how it is, learned as well as the type of assessment to demonstrate learning.
- Learning with Technology - Both in and out of class.
- Caring and Motivated Teacher - The teacher is excited about teaching the lesson and provides support to ensure that students meet challenging learning goals.
- Learning in Small Groups - Working with the teacher and peers in a small group to complete a task.
- Learning Concepts in Multiple Subject Areas - e.g. Writing in English and Social Studies.
- Projects - an assignment completed over some time.
- In-Class Practical Work - Work with real objects or materials to complete a modeled task.

IV. What would you say are some of the key things that can get struggling students excited about learning?

| What classroom factors, if any, inhibit motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth? | V. Describe a type of classroom that makes at-risk students not want to learn. Allow your senses to guide you.
- What do you see, hear, feel, etc.? |
| --- | --- |
| VI. Reflect on and describe a bad learning experience with struggling students.
- What were you doing?
- What were the struggling students doing?
- What were their peers doing? |
| VII. Share your thoughts and feelings on the following: Specifically, discuss how motivated, if at all, students are for learning:
- Tutoring/Remediation - Students receive instruction in areas of weakness.
- Working Individually to Complete Tasks on Areas of Weakness
- Preparing for Tests - Lessons on test-taking strategies |
| VIII. Describe some of the worst things that you as a teacher can do that may make at-risk students less excited about learning. |

**Questions III and VII may apply to both research questions.**

| IX. Describe the top three instructional strategies/approaches, if any, that have been effective in motivating your struggling learners. |
| X. Outside of instruction/teaching, describe up to five things that teachers can do to motivate students. |

The researcher developed the interview questions in consultation with the conceptual framework and other seminal research in the area of student motivation (Cardetti & McKenna, 2011; Alfassi, 2003; Knesting, 2008; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009; Flores, & Kaylor, 2011; and others).
2007; Blackburn & Armstrong, 2011; Rugutt and Chemosit, 2009; Yin-Kum, 2008; Lam, Cheng, & Ma, 2009; Kohn, 2010; Rieg, 2007; MacMath, Roberts, Wallace, & Xiaohong, 2010; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Rukavina, Zuvic-Butorac, Ledic, Milotic, & Jurdana-Sepic, 2012; Nolan, Preston, & Finkelstein, 2012). A jury of highly qualified teachers, as well as the dissertation mentor and committee members, reviewed the interview protocol to ensure validity and reliability. Revisions were made based on the feedback received from the review. All questions were provided to participants prior to the interview. In addition, participants were asked for permission to tape-record the interview. This process ensured that analysis was an accurate representation of the perceptions and views of participants.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam, 2009). For case studies in particular, this important role requires the researcher to possess certain key skills to collect quality data. These include the ability to ask good questions and interpret the answers; effective listening and avoidance of personal ideologies or preconceptions; adaptability and flexibility so that any situation that may arise can be interpreted as an opportunity and not a threat; a thorough understanding of the issue under study; and an unbiased posture towards preconceived notions, including those gained from existing research (Yin, 2009).

In addition to data collection, the researcher plays an instrumental role in the analysis of qualitative data. Patton (2002) comments, "Because qualitative inquiry depends, at every stage, on the skills, training, insights, and capabilities of the inquirer, qualitative analysis ultimately depends on the analytical intellect and style of the analyst" (p. 433). With such a focus on the
researcher in qualitative studies, a wise qualitative researcher will expose him/herself to the readers, noting reasons for interest in the issue, background, and potential bias, among others. Further, the researcher should employ strategies to ensure the highest level of reliability and validity of the study. These strategies are discussed in the validity and reliability section of this document.

Data Collection

The researcher secured approval from the district's superintendent to conduct the study in the selected middle schools with the target population. The administrative teams of both middle schools granted additional approval. The study was submitted for review to the Seton Hall University’s Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research (IRB) to ensure compliance with federal regulations, which protect the rights and welfare of research participants. All recommended revisions were completed and approval was secured.

Prior to collecting data, the researcher acknowledged the importance of participant confidentiality throughout the research process and took several steps to maintain the same. Gregory (2003) advises, “Confidentiality is best assured on the basis of anonymizing the collection of data” (p. 49). Thus, to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the potential teacher participants, the researcher used no real participant names throughout the dissertation document. Instead, numbers represented each teacher participant; for example, Teacher 1, Teacher 2, etc.

The data collection process commenced with the administrative teams of the four middle schools meeting with the researcher to ask questions about the study and give the researcher access to the teachers and building. A packet prepared by the researcher, which included the
purpose of the research study and research questions, solicitation letter, and consent form was provided to each potential participant who met the research criteria. A deadline was set for the return of consent forms. From all returned forms, convenience sampling (Merriam, 2009) was employed to narrow the sample size to 18 teachers. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed to ensure reliability and validity. Tape recording has numerous benefits for both researcher and participants. Seidman (1998) offers that some of these include the preservation of the participants’ original words, which promotes participant confidence and ensures that the researcher can perform accuracy checks and be accountable to the data. The recordings are secured in a locked cabinet within the researcher’s home and will be systematically destroyed after three years of completion of the study.

Data Analysis

“Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning.” (Merriam, 2009, p. 175-176). The steps in qualitative analysis include (1) preliminary exploration of the data by reading through the transcripts and writing memos; (2) coding the data by segmenting and labeling the text; (3) using codes to develop themes by aggregating similar codes; (4) connecting and interrelating themes; and (5) constructing a narrative (Creswell, 2002). For the current study, data analysis carefully followed these steps.

To begin, I transcribed the data from the recorded interviews and proceeded with two close reads of the transcripts, noting initial impressions and potential emerging themes and patterns. A third read initiated an inductive coding process, where codes were not predetermined
but naturally emerged from the data. “Coding involves the classification of elements in text data into categories that are related to the study topic and are useful in analysis” (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012, p. 98). In this stage of coding, I utilized various colors of highlighters to identify specific broad categories within the data for each individual case (e.g., teacher instructional practice, incentives, etc.) and continued analysis for specific themes. For the next round of coding, a table was created to organize similar patterns and themes across multiple cases. In-depth analysis and interpretation of these identified commonalities shaped the major research findings and conclusions of the study. Of this process, Patton (2002) notes, “This descriptive phase of analysis builds a foundation for the interpretative phase when meanings are extracted from the data, comparisons are made, creative frameworks for interpretation are constructed, conclusions are drawn, significance is determined, and in some cases, theory is generated" (p. 465).

In the discussion of these findings, the specific research questions, which guided the study, were addressed through the presentation of main themes with individual quotes when appropriate.

**Validity and Reliability**

Several strategies were used to promote validity and reliability in the study. Among these are member checks, adequate engagement in data collection, researcher's position or reflexivity, peer review/examination, and rich, thick description (Merriam, 2009). Member checks were performed throughout the study, as respondents had access to review recorded and transcribed interviews and early interpretations of the findings. Adequate engagement in data collection was addressed in semi-structured interviews, which ranged from 20 to 35 minutes for each
respondent. In terms of the researcher’s position or reflexivity, the researcher shared the limitations and delimitations of the study, noting any personal bias. In addition, the researcher shared her background and reasons for interest in the study. Peer review and examination was conducted throughout the study. A jury of highly qualified teachers and the dissertation committee, including the dissertation mentor, thoroughly reviewed interview questions and provided feedback for revisions. For every other component of the research study, the dissertation committee served as close readers and provided detailed feedback, which informed revisions. Providing rich, thick description in the study was important, especially in the presentation of the research findings. To facilitate this, direct quotes from respondents were presented.

**Summary**

Presented in this chapter was an in-depth overview of the study’s methodology. Starting with the research design, I noted that to answer the research questions, qualitative research was most appropriate through the case study design. Details relating to the study’s setting and target population were shared. It was specified that the setting be within four urban middle schools in a New Jersey school district. Each school has a large number of the study’s target population, which are teachers of eighth-grade at-risk students. In addition, the research instrument was described as well as the methods for collecting and analyzing the research. The remaining chapters share the study’s findings according to themes as well as provide a discussion of findings and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the classroom factors that inspire and inhibit urban eighth-grade at-risk student motivation for learning. The perceptions of teachers from core subject areas, including English, mathematics, science, and social studies, were solicited and gained through a qualitative methodology of semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Eighteen teachers were selected randomly to participate in the study and represented four middle schools in an urban school district in New Jersey. Each teacher met the criteria of having taught eighth-grade students who are at-risk for academic failure as evidenced by their performance within the classroom and on benchmark and or state standardized assessments. To gather data, in-person interviews were conducted within each respective school for 12 participants. For the convenience of the remaining six teachers, interviews were conducted via phone. This chapter presents the findings of the study as well as an analysis of these findings.

Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis

A protocol of open-ended interview questions, aligned to the study’s three research questions and seminal literature, was created to collect qualitative data. Participant responses to the interview questions provided the data for the study. All responses were closely read multiple times and coded for key ideas. Creating codes allowed the researcher to determine commonalities and recurrent ideas across multiple interviews and cases. This process facilitated the researcher generation and analysis of overarching themes or patterns. These themes are presented in this chapter and are organized according to research question. Table 2 (see
shows the relationship between the study’s research questions and the aligned interview questions.

Interview Questions 1 and 2 were designed to obtain teachers’ overall perception of what might represent a motivating classroom for at-risk students without being provided, in advance, any specific factors/attributes to reflect on. Teachers were specifically asked to use their senses to describe an ideal motivating classroom for this population. In addition, they were asked to reflect on and share a real experience when at-risk students were excited to learn. The responses provided rich, clean data and served two unique purposes. They confirmed research in the area of student motivation for at-risk students and validated several characteristics listed in Question 3. Question 4 provided another opportunity for teachers to reflect on their experiences and highlight key factors that inspire student motivation. The second research question addressed the factors that inhibited motivation. The interview questions followed the same structure used with Research Question 1. The final research question asks teachers to consider their role in motivating at-risk students and describe the top strategies both instructional and non-instructional that have worked to motivate this population.

**Research Question 1 and Related Themes and Patterns**

The first research question asks the following question: What classroom factors, if any, facilitate motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth? The responses from participants indicate strong perceptions of several classroom factors that facilitate student motivation. After multiple close reads of participant responses and synthesis of key findings, themes and patterns emerged.
The two themes for Research Question 1 are as follows:

1. Caring and motivated teacher
2. Student directed learning

For each theme, specific patterns were present. The theme of motivated teacher showed patterns that included preparedness, modeling enthusiasm for teaching and learning, and consistently recognizing and celebrating student success. The patterns for the second theme of student-directed instruction included relevant instruction, hand-on activities, choice in learning, and technology integration. In the paragraphs that follow, each theme with its noted patterns are presented separately and supported with quotes from teacher participants.

**Theme 1: Caring and Motivated Teacher**

As explained earlier in this chapter, the first two interview questions presented the study’s participants an opportunity to share their perceptions of an ideal motivating classroom for urban eighth-grade at-risk students as well as to reflect on real learning experiences which proved motivating for this population. The remaining interview questions for Research Question 1 allowed participants to dig deeper into their teaching practice and share individual experiences and perceptions of research-supported classroom factors that have shown positive results for increasing student motivation. The responses from all teacher participants to these themes provided overwhelming support for the role of a motivated teacher in inspiring at-risk student motivation. Teacher 8 offered the following:

A motivated teacher is a requirement. At-risk students respond well when they find that you care about them and that you’re motivated in what you’re doing. What they are learning then becomes more important to them. So if you’re motivated and they see
you’re enjoying it and they see the reason, they get excited and want to be a part of that.

Discussing student motivation as demonstrated by fewer discipline issues in the classroom, Teacher 3 reflected on one of her classes, noting the following:

They [students] give less problems. They will try harder to get the work done. That’s been the result 100% of the time. I have a class this year, right now, with girls who face tremendous academic and emotional challenges, yet they’ve never given me an issue. In the other classes, they wreak havoc, but they know that I care about them, and they’ve told me before. I’m like, "Why do you guys, you know, give so and so a hard time? They are like, "Well, they don’t care about us." So what's the difference between me and the teacher? And they’re like, "You actually care, we know you care and believe in us, and we like you."

Sharing similar views is Teacher 9. She noted that her struggling students know the teachers who truly care. Teacher 9 described herself as “nurturing” and one who holds students to high expectations. One way has been to “call home,” much to the displeasure of her students. However, she emphasized that she continuously shares with the students that “teachers, who care, call home.” This she believes makes an impact. “They get upset for the moment, like, they will come in and say, "You called my house." And then I have to reiterate the fact that those teachers who call are the teachers who care. And I think it really connects to them. I really do. Deep down, I really do.”

While the individual stories and teachers’ views of how to demonstrate “care” and “motivation” differed, all 18 teacher participants strongly agreed that at-risk students need highly
motivated and caring teachers. Within the theme of motivated teacher were observable patterns across interviews. The three patterns were as follows:

1. Teacher preparedness
2. Modeling enthusiasm
3. Recognizing and celebrating student success.

**Pattern 1. Teacher preparedness.** Among all participants was the belief that at-risk students take careful notice of teachers who spend the time to effectively prepare their lessons. Such teachers are ready and eager to respond to students’ needs. The benefit of such preparation is increased levels of student motivation. It sends the message that teachers “care” and understand the “high needs” of students they are serving.

Seated with the researcher in a private corner of the school’s media center, Teacher 15 appeared relaxed, engaged, and eager to share her experiences. Speaking enthusiastically, she underscored the importance of teacher preparedness towards inspiring motivation with at-risk students. She stated the following:

If teachers are not passionate about what they’re doing, if they don't care about student success and growth, then they just create any lesson and not help the students at all. And so, the student feels like teachers don't care enough to come properly prepared with activities that motivate them to pay attention and follow. They don't want to do the same thing every day and they can tell when the teacher doesn’t care when they’re doing the same thing every day.

Also distinguishing preparedness as a trait of a motivated teacher and an influencer of motivation in at-risk students is Teacher 1. She explained as follows:
It really comes with the job. You can’t expect to help our kids without really preparing. They are on so many levels, that it is tough with so many hours. But teachers who really care about kids just do it. They find the time to just do it. When they enter your class and you have a great lesson, even if they are resistant, even if something happened at home or in school, you can immediately see that they want to learn. And it doesn’t take long for them to get into it and they eventually love you for it.

Preparedness was not only described in terms of instructional planning, Teachers 2, 5, and 18 raised the dimension of mental preparedness. These teachers shared that effectively responding to the needs of at-risk students is a challenging task. It is one that requires not only a significant effort in terms of research, planning, and execution, but also a strong commitment to developing the mental stamina for showing up every day and finding the energy to be effective and move students towards achievement. Teacher 2 shared, “A teacher who cares is emotionally prepared to welcome and meet the needs of students. If they are not, it shows and the students react to it.” Teacher 5’s perception of motivation also reinforced the idea of being mentally prepared as he shared, “I learned a long time ago the result of not being 100% for my students because my mind was on something else. And the kids know. They know when you are not 100%, and they let you know with their behavior.”

Furthering this discussion is Teacher 18. Throughout the interview, he spoke passionately and emotionally about his role in meeting the needs of at-risk student. Commenting on mental preparedness, he stated, “It isn’t easy dealing with students who don’t want to learn or who are way below grade level. Many of them come into the classroom just to make trouble and play. For
me, I have to be mentally ready. I know that the period is not going to be easy, but I know why and I am ready to be there for them.”

Like Teacher 18, there was no hesitancy among participants in sharing that servicing at-risk students is a tremendous challenge. The majority of teachers intentionally represented that they must work hard, they must effectively prepare, and be “present” for students every day. It is important to note that regardless of the individual experiences with at-risk students, all teacher participants felt that the payoff of working hard for students was the fulfillment of witnessing their increases in excitement for learning and student achievement. Teacher 2 summed it up best when she said, “When students who have a hard time learning actually learn, you can see it means a lot to them. They become attached to you and really want to keep coming to your class to learn.”

**Pattern 2: Modeling enthusiasm.** A second pattern noted for the theme *Caring and Motivated Teacher* was modeling enthusiasm. Throughout the interviews, teachers spoke directly about the importance of “modeling motivation” in the teaching and learning process. While there were variations in what “modeling motivation” looks like, most accepted that a teacher demonstrating enthusiasm for the subject matter being taught went a long way to increase motivation for at-risk students. “We cannot expect students who are not doing well to want to learn. We have to be the example to them of what it means to want to learn. We have to model, model, model,” Teacher 6 stated. Reflecting on her classroom, Teacher 12 spoke passionately about this enthusiasm, describing it in terms of “energy.” She stated the following:

If the teacher is caring and if the teacher is motivated, he’s going to help. Because a lot of kids like where there is good energy, you understand? When you have that energy and
you try to put it in your teaching, the kids tend to pay more attention. Like some of my
students will tell me that they like to be in my class because I’m warm, have a lot of
energy, and even when you don’t want to do something, the way you come across will
make them want to do it
Teacher 7 agreed that a key strategy for motivating at-risk students is modeling
motivation. “When you come to class and have the right voice, facial expression, and excitement
for the content you’re teaching, students will feed off that same energy and at least try to do the
work.” This idea of modeling motivation was present in several other participants’ implemented
strategies for motivating at-risk students. Among these were Teacher 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, and 16.

Weighing in on modeling enthusiasm, Teacher 11 explained that despite how she might
really feel on a given day, she ensures that she models excitement when seeing her struggling
students:

They feel a sense of belonging. They feel it, and it changes everything. It changes
everything when you know your students. I could be as tired as anything; but as soon as
the class comes in, I just act it out. I just go like, “Wow, I’m so glad to see you. It’s a
good day. Wow, I’m honored that you’re here.” Little things like that, which I find really
funny, but they go with it. They’re into it.

Teacher 14 works in an alternative setting where the total population is considered at-
risk. She spoke confidently and reflectively as she described her experiences with students who
struggle academically. She noted, “If the teacher is excited, the students will be excited. And
especially if the teacher knows their subject matter and they are excited about teaching it, yeah,
the students become motivated also.”
Teacher 13 shared his approach to modeling motivation. “I don’t go easy on my students. My expectations are high for them and myself. They see me holding myself to high expectations for delivering the topic in a way they would understand it.” This approach, explains Teacher 13, shows his students that he is motivated, and “they respond positively to it.”

All teacher participants agreed that it is important for any teacher of struggling students to be a model of motivation. Teachers should “model” what they expect. Teacher 5 stated, “When kids who have had problems learning enter your classroom, they should feel safe and like someone wants them there.” He further explains that it is the teacher’s job to make students believe that it is a safe environment to be themselves and take risks. “The teacher must show this to students from the way they look and talk to students to what kind of work they give students”

**Pattern 3: Recognizing and celebrating student success.** The third pattern that emerged related to the theme of caring and motivated teacher was recognizing and celebrating student success. Among teachers, there was strong agreement that celebrating student success plays an invaluable role in ensuring a high level of motivation in struggling students and that it is represented in many ways.

Teacher 1 made this point. She emphasized that “recognition could take different forms even just by acknowledging their efforts and commending them on, you know, a job achieved or well done . . . [it] goes such a long way in motivating them to do even better or continue to do well.”

Throughout the interviews, teachers shared individual approaches to recognizing and celebrating their students. During the interview, when asked to reflect on recognition and rewards, Teacher 6’s face lit up and she responded quickly and repetitively, showing a strong
eagerness and excitement to share her experiences. She noted and reiterated that she makes consistent positive phone calls home and her students absolutely “love it, love it, love it.” They respond, she explains, by doing their work in the classroom in hopes of receiving more positive phone calls. She underscored that whether it is a phone call or a note home, struggling students have a strong desire for their parents to know how well they are doing.

Speaking reflectively, Teacher 5 also shared that positive phone calls home are important and effective in motivating his students. In addition, Teacher 5 provided an explanation for why struggling students are motivated by a teacher celebrating their success. He noted as follows:

They’re not used to getting praised for the things they do—and I feel as a middle school teacher, I’m aware about them wanting to be great. They want to be a CEO of a company or president. And I want to be there to praise their successes. Whatever motivates them is good enough for me right now and I’ll do it.

Throughout multiple interviews, praise was distinguished as one of the most effective strategies for celebrating student success. Teacher 16 shared her experience. “Rewards, like things, are good but I stopped giving things to my kids when they do something great, as I found praise to do more for them. Praise lasts longer than things.”

In much the same way, Teacher 10 added that students respond instantly to praise and remain motivated throughout the learning activity.

Praise is a big thing. You get an instant response when you praise students. If they were on task and you give them kudos for doing something great, they stay on task. It also depends on the child. Some kids may feel uncomfortable with praise, but regardless when
you give it to them, they're mindful of the fact that they received it, and they are motivated to keep moving forward to the next task.

Giving more strength to the argument that praise versus tangible rewards brings stronger benefits for an at-risk student is Teacher 7. She noted the following:

I don't know that they're as motivated with tangible rewards as with praise and acknowledgement. I think my struggling ones are really less excited about tangible rewards. They are more excited with “You did that better today” and “I see you improved on that.” . . . “Look, you were struggling and how well you do that.” They respond better to praise and acknowledgement than to anything tangible.

Furthermore, Teacher 7 shared an interesting observation as she compared and contrasted the response to praise and incentives from her struggling students versus students meeting expectations. She stated, “Funny enough, the ones who are not struggling respond better to tangible rewards, but the struggling ones respond better to an acknowledgement of how great they’re doing. That’s actually better for me.”

While praise was distinguished as a highly effective way to celebrate student success and inspire motivation in at-risk students, several teachers also shared positive experiences regarding the effect of tangible rewards. Among the most popular rewards cited by participants were certificates, money, food, stickers, stationery, pens and pencils, points, or skipped assignments.

Teacher 8 shared, “If they know that there is going to be a reward, especially if it is reward or incentive they like, they will buy in and become more motivated. Several other teachers shared similar experiences with tangible rewards. However, several teachers shared that
when tangible rewards and praise are coupled, it is most effective in motivating students.

Teacher 9 spoke to this point:

I had a stack of certificates on my desk. And they always say, “Am I going to get a certificate today?” They love rewards and praise, just like adults. In fact, every quarter we have an awards program, and we recognize those students who have been doing well. They walk on stage for everyone to see them, receive a certificate, and shake the hands of school administration. I know one of the other teachers who do a month-to-month thing: Student of the Month. And so, they just love it.

Ultimately, all participants shared strong positive perceptions and experiences with recognizing student success. Whether it is tangible rewards or acts of praise for student success, struggling students respond positively and increase their commitment to complete the learning activity, therefore making progress in the learning process.

**Theme 2: Student-directed Learning**

The second theme that emerged for Research Question 1 is *Student Directed Learning.* Throughout the interviews, regardless of the subject area or unique demographics of each school, a majority of teachers shared strong positive perceptions of the relationship between students taking ownership of their learning and increases in their motivation for learning. Specifically, it was noted that when teachers provide opportunities for struggling students to make decisions about their learning, motivation increases. As a teacher of social studies, Teacher 13 shared about her experience with releasing responsibility to her students.

Children of today are different. They don’t want the teacher to give all the information. They become more engaged when you create an exciting activity and let them get to
work. They want to do it. I have to always check how much I talk during class. If it is too much, I lose them.

Many other teachers shared similar experiences. They believed that to effectively meet the needs of today’s struggling students, teachers must assume the role of facilitator of learning. They shared that teacher-centered practices like lecturing and consistent whole-class instruction must be replaced by more collaborative ways of learning, where students have a say in the process. “These children don’t want to just sit and listen to the teachers talk about things that don’t matter to them. We have to make their learning fun and engaging,” Teacher 15 passionately stated.

Within this theme of student-directed learning, four patterns were identified. These included the following:

1. Relevant Instruction
2. Choice in Learning
3. Hands-on Activities
4. Technology Integration

**Pattern 1: Relevant instruction.** The first pattern related to student-directed learning that emerged throughout the interviews was relevant instruction. It is important to note that no specific interview question directly asked teachers about the relevance of instruction to motivating struggling students. Yet, throughout interviews, either explicitly or implicitly, teachers believed that to inspire motivation, struggling students must deem the learning relevant to them or their lives. “They must clearly see that connection,” Teacher 3 stated.
In agreement was Teacher 9, a social studies teacher in the alternative school. Reflecting, with much emotion in her voice, she expressed the following:

For the most part, these students feel that school is boring for whatever reason. Whatever you know—whether it's a home situation or other experiences that didn't turn out so well for them—this is their last chance here to turn it around. They want to enjoy learning about things that matter to them. So, we have to give them the chance to do so.

Teachers suggested that when activities are relevant, students stay on-task and the quality of their work improves. Teacher 4 offered an additional explanation: “The students who do poorly have a negative attitude towards learning. Learning has to be fun and interesting to change this attitude. It works, and is such a plus, when students can identify with what they are learning.”

Sharing a similar sentiment, Teacher 3 stated that struggling students simply “like it.” She added that such students “deal with a lot of stuff in their lives, in their neighborhoods; and when they feel the learning applies or is something that they can relate to, that they really understand, they actually—they really, like it.”

Further discussing student experiences and why relevance in instruction is important is Teacher 9, who explained, “They want to be somebody, have interesting past experiences, and know so much. We just have to give them the opportunities in school that are meaningful to them and allow them to analyze and share these experiences.”

Across interviews, teachers pointed out that getting to know students on a personal level is one of the important steps towards designing instruction that is relevant. Student performance data were regarded as key to determining areas of needs for students and planning instruction.
that is relevant to meeting those needs. However, other types of student data were cited as equally or more essential to this process. Among these were student interest, background, unique talents/skills, future goals, likes and dislikes, among others. Teachers underscored the importance of gathering such data early on in the school year via student surveys or by consistently conferencing with students.

Teacher 3 asserted that when teachers take the time to get to know their students and make the learning relevant, students achieve more success and feel supported. She explained:

They feel like, wow, this is relevant to them. So, by giving them this kind of instructional support, they feel like they will get something right—something that they understand. And if they get it wrong, the teacher should be there to tell them, "It's okay. Just try it again," because a lot of our kids have that fear of being wrong and looking like they're stupid.

There was agreement among several teachers (Teachers 1, 7, 9, 10, 12, and 14, among others) that projects, in particular, present a great opportunity for teachers to increase relevance in learning. Many shared that their students enjoy projects because they get a chance to utilize their skills or talents and focus on topics that interest them. Teacher 1 stated the following:

I think if it is a project that they have a connection with or something that relates to real life or, you know, interests them, the overall response or work quality, I would go as far as saying, would be higher or different in comparison to a project that they can’t really relate to.

Teacher 7 did not hold back her excitement for projects. “Project are great,” she stated. “Students enjoy being able to do their own thing. When selecting topics, as long as I give areas
that they like, they are excited and do their best. I would highly recommend projects to anyone working with struggling students.” She added the following:

Ultimately, across interviews, there was strong agreement that teachers must make the learning relevant for struggling students if they expect to inspire motivation and ensure student growth. To do so, teachers should make it a priority to get to know their students and use all gathered data to design interesting learning activities that students can connect with and appreciate.

**Pattern 2: Choice in learning.** The second pattern that emerged for the theme of student-directed learning was choice in learning. To a majority of teachers, providing students with choice in what is learned and how it is learned proved highly motivating. Teacher 5 underscored the importance of student choice in learning. He asserted the following:

Choice is big. Its big because, see, all students are different. Some students aren’t good writers but they can explain what they’re doing orally. So, I’ll let them explain it to me. Or, they might be better with numbers than they are with words. So in their explanation, I’ll ask them to just show me your work. You have to know them and give them what they need”

Teacher 7 shared similar support for choice in learning. She explained that students love choice because it gives them some control over their learning. In discussing a writing strategy, which allows choice, she adds:

Oh, they love it and are really excited for that. In my class, when I give them RAFTs—Role/Audience/Format/Topic—and ask them to choose one or more areas, they really enjoy that. Sometimes, I would give them the role and ask them to find the audience,
format, and topic, and you can just see how excited they become. I would definitely tell anyone that choice works.

Discussing a natural barrier to giving choice, Teacher 15 explains that, while choice works, some teachers are resistant to giving students choice, as it represents a loss of control:

I think that choice is one of the most difficult things for teachers because it means relinquishing control. That isn’t easy. But it is important. I believe that if you give students choice, then they get to put a part of themselves into what they're doing. Whether it's an assessment or a performance task, it sort of allows them to basically build on their own strengths and find their weaknesses that they can again continue to grow and learn.

Adding to the discussion is Teacher 11, who argued that when teachers give students choice in learning, they are responding to students’ individual needs, or differentiating instruction.

Choice is a great way to differentiate your instruction. Not only do they love it, it plays up their strengths, which is great for their self-esteem. I can say projects are good. Just students being able to make a choice instead of being dictated what they need to do makes them want to do more. I think they take more ownership and pride in what they do when they are given choices.

All in all, choice was perceived very favorably by a majority of teachers for effectively motivating at-risk students to want to achieve learning goals. Among the overarching reasons for its effectivity is that it gives control to the students and provides opportunities for success, as it plays on student strengths.
**Pattern 3: Hands-on activities.** The third emerging pattern for the theme of student-directed learning is hands-on activities. According to a majority of teachers, when at-risk eighth-graders play an active role in their learning and where learning is hands-on, motivation increases. Teacher 14 provided some insight:

> Hands-on activities work well for our lowest performing students. Unfortunately, we don’t have the classes that we used to when we were growing up, like home economics and industrial arts. Back then, students were more motivated to come to school because they were looking forward to going to those classes. So it does work when students are working hands on because they are part of the process. They take ownership of it because they are doing instead of just sitting with paper and pen and completing worksheets.

As a science teacher, Teacher 1 shared that creating hands-on lessons is a requirement of her job. She explains that students are engaged during such lessons because it allows them to be active participants, which provides deeper learning:

> When hands-on projects are done, or hands-on related things in general that engage all senses, students are motivated. They are measuring, writing down data, asking questions, smelling, looking at, and engaging with multiple senses or modalities. It definitely deepens the learning experience and makes them want more.

Teachers 4, 7, and 9 emphasized their students’ love of projects, explaining that it is hands-on and gives students an opportunity to use their unique skills to create.

So when they create, whether it’s a song or some type of object, or whatever it may be, to show their understanding, they enjoy it. They really like it and do well. When they are
using manipulatives, they like the feeling of both seeing and feeling the work they are doing. They begin to care about the work and want to come to class (Teacher 4).

Teacher 9 added that because of her students’ love of projects, they want all learning to be project-based. She noted that she has made significant changes in the way she teaches because of this response from students.

I am now a strong supporter of projects for students who do poorly. I run my classes, as much as possible, as project-based classes. In my room, there are project boards all over the place and it can get messy and loud as students are working together on projects. They bring things from home and I do too. They really do enjoy it. Anything hands-on, they really do enjoy.

According to Teacher 5, the use of manipulatives promotes hands-on learning experiences and motivates struggling students:

They love using manipulatives. While I can’t use them every day for everything, when I incorporate them into my learning activities, the students really like it, especially those who are performing extremely low. It makes it fun. Even though they are young adults, they still like what little kids like. They love to use their hands.

All in all, the researcher observed a high level of enthusiasm from teachers in their discussion if it involved hands-on activities as an approach to inspiring motivation in struggling students. According to teachers, struggling students are more motivated to use their hands in the learning process and as a result achieve more success academically.

**Pattern 4: Technology integration.** The fourth pattern that emerged for the theme of student-directed learning was technology integration within instruction. There is a wealth of
research which supports the use of technology to improve learning outcomes (Pogrow, 1990; Nolan, Preston, & Finkelstein, 2012). All teachers interviewed in this study agreed that technology plays an important role in the teaching and learning process. They specifically noted that for struggling students, technology is a motivator, providing opportunities for success and targeting instruction to students’ individual needs. Teacher 16 explained, “Children recognize technology and are comfortable using it. It only makes sense that we use it for them to learn,” adding, “For my kids who experience a lot of difficulty and failure with the work, using various technology programs helps them to catch up with the rest of the class, and they feel good about themselves as a result.”

Many of the responses mirrored that of Teacher 16. Take for instance Teacher 1, who underscored that technology “empowers” struggling students.

I think they are excited about technology, period. Every opportunity that they can use technology within the learning experience is always positive. What I find is that even if the student struggles in terms of the content area, technology is such an extensive part of their lives—and they understand it—that it empowers them. They can easily utilize it for learning the subject matter.

Teacher 7 shared that her struggling students actually help her with using technology. Discussing Smart Board technology, she expressed that they are excited to interact with the Smart Board. “I think kids are really excited for technology. Using a Smart Board has been really good for my kids. They are turned on to seeing and doing things on a Smart Board and always participate willingly” (Teacher 7 In a similar way, Teacher 2 showed strong positive perceptions about the role of technology in motivating struggling students:

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They like using it, I guess, because they can pull in so many different things. For example, I have a small group of boys who are working on a skit. But they want to also mix music for the skit. So they found an app that they are really excited about and will create the music for their skit. These boys are almost never really excited to do work. But when they get to use technology to create the music and combine different things together that they like, they just take off.

Teacher 15 stated that technology integration is “necessary” for struggling students. “Because of this technology era, technology in the classroom is necessary; keyword, necessary.”

She further noted the following:

The colors, the sounds, the fact that they get to, you know, get away from books is motivating. Everyone doesn’t like to read a book, the difficult vocabulary, the complex sentences. So when you incorporate technology into it and it's at a level that's on their level, it makes it a lot more engaging, whereas a textbook is always the same.

Technology programs can be based on the students’ ability.

While in agreement that technology can motivate struggling students to want to learn, Teacher 3 cautioned that it depends on how it is used. She noted that in her experience using a particular technology program, student motivation was very low.

We're forced to use this program, and they hate it. They will, you know, pretty much follow directives and do what they're supposed to do, but it is too repetitive. All they do is sit there and click, and they're supposed to read and they don’t. Unless I make it fun for them, they are not interested.

Teacher 5 shared a similar experience with another program. He noted that while his
students love the computers, they are not motivated to use programs that make them sit and just answer questions.

The program is more like a practice on different concepts and stuff that we go over in class and they get really distracted. It is boring and they don’t want to do it. So if I’m not really over them all the time monitoring them, they will stop and get on Snapchat or whatever social media they have.

He further shared that since he is required to implement such a program, he had to find other ways to motivate them to get through the work. He achieved this by giving them free time to use technology in ways that they like.

In summary, all teachers in this study showed strong positive perceptions about the role of technology for inspiring struggling students to want to learn. However, it was noted that technology should be used in ways that students enjoy, where they are directing their learning and creating. The use of technology programs for practicing deficient skills was not noted as motivating.

To recap, for Research Question 1, two themes were distinguished. These were (1) caring and motivated teacher and (2) student directed learning. For each theme, patterns emerged. For the theme caring and motivated teacher, the patterns included preparedness, modeling enthusiasm, and recognizing student success. For the second theme of student-directed learning, the four patterns included relevant instruction, hands-on activities, choice in learning, and technology integration.

**Research Question 2 and Related Themes and Patterns**

The second research question asks the following: What classroom factors, if any, inhibit
motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth? The associated interview questions asked teachers to reflect on their experiences within the classroom, first by describing and evaluating specific negative experiences with struggling students to determine possible causes. In addition, teachers were asked to share perceptions and experiences on specific factors that may have inhibiting effects for at-risk students. The responses from participants indicate strong perceptions of several classroom factors that inhibit student motivation. The researcher conducted multiple close reads of participant responses and synthesized key findings, leading to specific themes and patterns. Two themes for Research Question 2 emerged:

1. Teacher-centered learning practices
2. Indifferent and/or uncaring teacher

For each theme, specific patterns were present. The theme of teacher-centered learning practices showed patterns that included lecturing, individual remediation, and summative assessments. The patterns for the second theme of indifferent and/or uncaring teacher included poor classroom management, too rigorous or too easy, and demeaning or disrespectful. It is important to note that these themes represent an antithesis to those identified for Research Question 1. In the paragraphs that follow, each theme with its noted patterns are presented separately and supported with quotes from teacher participants.

**Theme 1: Teacher-Centered Learning Practices**

A significant number of teachers interviewed in this study felt strongly about the role that teacher-centered practices play in inhibiting motivation for struggling students. Teachers 10 and 18 admitted that while moving away from teacher-centered approaches in the classroom was not easy, it was necessary if they hoped to motivate and engage their students. Teacher 12 shared
the following:

Times have changed and our students have changed. The way we grew up learning is not the way today’s kids learn. And for students who are experiencing difficulty or failure, it is even more important that we move away from teacher centered learning. We can’t take center stage and lecture for a period. Those days are over and it is not effective.

Like Teacher 12, a significant number of respondents shared similar perceptions and experiences related to the theme of teacher-centered approaches. The patterns that emerged for this theme included the following:

1. Lecturing
2. Individual Remediation
3. Summative Assessments

**Pattern 1: Lecturing.** The first pattern for the theme of teacher-centered approaches was lecturing. When teachers were asked to describe a type of classroom that makes students not want to learn, several described scenarios where the teacher is at the front of the class teaching while students sit and listen passively. Teachers 2, 8, and 13 confessed that lecturing was their default approach at one point or the other in their teaching careers. They noted that they were inspired and/or forced to change because of feedback from instructional leaders, inspiring professional development and/or real-time student engagement data. Teacher 13 highlights that his students’ negative response to lecturing is what forced him to change and develop more student-directed approaches.

In social studies, there is so much content that if you are not careful and thoughtful, you find yourself talking a lot. When I first started teaching, I would prepare these beautiful
PowerPoints and often found myself lecturing the whole period. The kids liked the pictures but that's about it. Many appeared bored or distracted hearing me talk. Even when I asked questions, many students weren’t very excited to get involved. I quickly learned that I had to change the way I was teaching to get them more involved, to work in groups and doing the work, not me.

Speaking reflectively, Teacher 2 shared that her school’s push, supported by professional development, towards strategies that engage students has dramatically improved her teaching. She commented that a teacher who effectively prepares, does so by considering the unique needs of students. In describing the type of class that may inhibit motivation, she noted the following:

The worst kind of classroom for a kid who isn’t doing well is a boring one. Kids like to get up and move around to learn. It is boring when students are seated in rows, facing the teacher, listening to the teacher teach and the teacher is unprepared because he/she doesn’t think about their learning styles or multiple intelligences or anything.

Taking the discussion further, Teacher 11 underscored the role of the teacher to share information in the class. However, she noted that the teacher should pace teacher talk to student talk, ensuring that teacher talk is significantly less. She stated the following,

So one thing that I do to ensure that my students don’t lose focus and become disengaged is monitor how long I am teaching or modeling. For me it is about 10 to 15 minutes the most, and then the students have to talk to each other and work together to complete the tasks. If I spend too long teaching, I lose them.

While several teachers specified that they have made the shift from lecturing to modeling and releasing responsibility to students, they admit still feeling some discontent. Teacher 13
reflected on his secondary schooling, sharing that times have “really changed,” noting that it’s not necessarily for the best. He underscored, “Children need to learn how to focus, take notes, listen, and work independently. They have lost that focus. It really has a lot to do with the fact that teachers are not allowed to really teach anymore.”

In a similar way, Teacher 12 also reflected on her school days, asserting, “Unlike today, discipline was enforced in schools and at home.” She noted that this emphasis on discipline ensured that students “were accountable for paying attention to the teacher and putting forth their best effort.”

All in all, teachers shared that for struggling students, sitting passively and listening to a teacher lecture or talk for a long period of time inhibits motivation.

**Pattern 2: Individual remediation.** The second pattern that emerged for the theme of teacher-centered approaches was individual remediation. This pattern relates specifically to the interview question that asked teachers to reflect and share how motivated, if at all, struggling students are for tutoring/remediation on areas of weakness. The responses overwhelmingly indicated students’ disapproval of remediation, specifically when it singles them out in any way in or out of the classroom. Teachers 1, 2, 7, 9, 13, 14, and 18 provided detailed insight into how struggling students feel about remediation.

Teacher 2 stated, “Students who struggle don’t like any attention on their weaknesses. If you want them to shut down, just pull them out for remediation or put them in a corner of the class to work on areas of weakness.”

Providing further insight, Teacher 2 discussed two programs that her school implemented to remediate student deficiencies. She noted that for both, students lack motivation to participate.
We have this program—Read 180—for students who need more targeted reading instruction and who are grade levels behind. The program is online and is by their levels. I also have stations with groups of students. Since they are not joining their peers for enrichment, they know that Read180 is for students who need extra help. And it bothers them. They don’t like to think that they need that kind of help. It makes them feel stupid. So they just go through the motions. The afterschool program is another example. I worked it one year and I can tell you the struggling are never interested in attending. They hide, cut, or make a lot of trouble when forced to be there. You always have to mention an incentive, like a party or gift cards, or something to get them to stay.

In agreement is Teacher 1 who stated, “I think it not necessarily one of their favorite options because again it singles out the student and so on. It also magnifies the deficiency in their mind and in the eyes of other students.” She explained that while her students have shown resistance, she still uses it because “it is valuable.”

Providing some guidance on how to effectively implement a remediation program for struggling students, Teacher 9 offered, “If we are using a computer-based program that differentiates to remediate student skills and all students have to use the program, then the struggling students would tolerate it. A program like Achieve 3000 provides remediation for struggling students and helps move the higher kids even higher.”

Teacher 14 shared the following:

So when you first start interventions and remediation, I think it’s important that you explain to the students that it’s for their benefit because if students are not told what’s happening, they become resistant and they are not as cooperative or responsive to what
you are trying to do for them. Some feel as if their peers would tease them. They feel almost like they are not adequate and that causes them to be resistant.

Adding to the discussion, Teachers 7 and 18 expressed that while remediation is important for helping struggling students, it should not single out students. Furthermore, they argue that if remediation is occurring in the classroom versus a pullout approach, teachers should “create tiered lessons and have all materials ready and groupings posted so that students take ownership of their learning and can move freely in the class without having to ask the teacher” (Teacher 18).

Teacher 13 makes the point that students’ response to remediation depends on the teacher and the classroom environment. She explains as follows:

If students like and trust their teacher, the students will feel comfortable doing anything that the teacher wants them to do. There will be more buy-in. With struggling students, they have to believe that you truly care and want them to succeed. My kids know that I love them, so they feel comfortable asking me any questions and getting things wrong. They keep trying. It's the same when I group them and have the lower performing students work on weaknesses.

Sharing a different experience is Teacher 10 who stated, “Struggling students want to do well, so if you have a remediation program that promises them improvement and they can see themselves getting better, they will do it.”

In summary, teachers shared that struggling students are not motivated for remediation. They resist anything that points out their deficiencies. However, teachers noted that students are
more likely to buy in to remediation when it is not isolating and when they perceive the teacher to have their best interest at heart.

**Pattern 3: Summative assessments.** The third pattern that emerged for the theme of teacher-centered approaches was summative assessments. According to the several teachers interviewed in this study, summative assessments severely inhibit at-risk students’ motivation for learning. Sharing his experience, Teacher 18 stated the following:

> My kids hate taking tests, especially when they know the test, assignment, or whatever will affect their grade. They typically don’t do well and they know it. So when it is time to take a test, you see them shut down, disrupt the class, or they just don’t write anything on the paper. It is hard to see but we are required to give these tests and update our gradebook.

He further noted that he prepares students for tests to help ease their anxiety and contribute to better performance. “Prior to each test, I review and reteach test-taking strategies and the skills that will be tested. They appreciate this. It helps; but since their levels are so low and the district benchmark or bi-weekly assessments aren’t differentiated, many still fail, which pulls down their grade” (Teacher 18).

In agreement is Teacher 10, who spoke passionately when asked to reflect and describe a type of classroom that makes at-risk students not want to learn. She shared, “It is any classroom that is unmanaged and boring. The teacher’s role is to keep things exciting for students and make them want to learn.” She provided examples of boring classrooms and among those were classrooms where students are over-tested.

> “No child who has failed before wants to fail again. And because of all of the on-demand
and high-stakes tests we give, they fail. They are tested too much and they just hate it. As teachers, we really feel for these kids. The test often does not show their potentials and abilities. Things have to change. We have to change how we test these students.”

Teacher 6 recommends assessments and opportunities that provide struggling students with more success.

I group my students heterogeneously and have them work together on activities. They’ve worked on projects and papers together. They enjoy it because they do well. With one or more students on grade level in each group, it helps the whole group. That offsets the effects that the required tests have on their motivation. But it isn’t perfect. Sometimes, in the groups, you have just one student doing the work. To fix this, I use a group rubric and students report on how each one has contributed. They are quick to tell on each other so they don’t play around.”

Teacher 1 admitted that while her students do not particularly like to take a test, she deems consistently assessing students to be among the most important role of the teacher but criticizes how assessments are used in schools.

If a teacher doesn’t formatively assess her students, there is no way to give the right support for kids to grow academically. Teachers need this information, or data, to do this. But we are using tests and any assessments to punish or reward kids. We shouldn’t do this. Instead of doing this type of checking, we should be checking for understanding during class and giving students tests only when they are ready or have acquired the skill.

Adding further to the discussion is Teacher 3, who stated, “The idea that students who are below grade level or come in with major deficiencies in reading would perform on the same level
as their grade level peers doesn’t make sense.” She further noted, “It is about growth for each student. It shouldn’t be about measuring everyone with the same yardstick. This is why our most needy students don’t enjoy school.”

In summary, teachers felt strongly about the inhibiting role summative assessment plays in the motivation of struggling students. They accept that assessments are important for determining needs and providing targeted support to help all students be successful.

**Theme 2: Indifferent and/or Uncaring Teacher**

In response to interview questions that asked teachers to reflect on the type of classroom that inhibits motivation, a significant number of participants argued that the teacher’s role is key. Similar to Research Question 1, where the theme of caring teacher was distinguished as having a motivational impact on at-risk students, when it came to what inhibits motivation, teachers perceived an indifferent and/or uncaring teacher to significantly inhibit motivation within struggling students. To be indifferent, one is generally unconcerned or uncaring towards a person or thing. Several patterns emerged for this theme, including the following:

1. Poor Classroom Management
2. Too Rigorous or Too Easy
3. Demeaning and/or Disrespectful

**Pattern 1: Poor classroom management.** Poor classroom management was perceived as either a teacher’s lack of strategies or “a general disregard for creating a managed environment that promotes student learning” (Teacher 1). When it is a lack of classroom management strategies, teachers asserted that if one is if willing to get better, one will. “Every teacher isn’t necessarily skilled with maintaining the most managed class. But you can get better
if you want to by reaching out for help, observing a colleague, or even through Youtube” (Teacher 10). However, it was noted that when teachers just fail to care, the students suffer. As teachers highlighted, at-risk students need to be captivated from the moment they enter the classroom.

Reflecting with regret, Teacher 3 detailed a period that she allowed personal issues to affect her teaching, which proved detrimental to her students’ motivation, specifically her at-risk students:

Something I’ve learned is that they don’t like waiting. They get a major attitude and just turn off. Then you have hell to pull them back into the lesson. I was going through some personal things and came to work late several times and didn’t really get to plan the most exciting lessons. So when I enter the class and have to start writing my agenda on the board and pulling out materials instead of having it ready for them, they have a field day. They make noise, argue, get on their phones, and the whole lesson is ruined. If they feel like you don’t give a hoot about them, you’ll get it back—a whole lot of it.

Teachers 10, 11, and 16 explained that they have high expectations for their students’ work and behavior. They hold all students accountable in the classroom. They noted that the key to maintaining a classroom of high expectations is to ensure that it is effectively managed through implementation and reinforcement of “rituals and routines” throughout the year.

According to Teacher 16, she had “a bad first couple years of teaching.” She shared that “students don’t care that you are new. If the classroom isn’t bright, fun, and where it should be and you don’t care about getting it right, you’re going to have a lot of problems for a long time.”
Teacher 18 agreed. “You can’t just wing it; you’ve got to plan enough to be ready every day.” He explained that struggling students don’t typically like English class. Further, he advised that the key areas of reading and writing call for classrooms that allow students to focus.

When students have to read silently or write their drafts for an essay, you can’t have distracting things in the classroom. You really have to think about everything that could get them off-task and address it. The students who fail are looking for every excuse not to focus and struggle through anything.”

Ultimately, these teachers noted that an unmanaged classroom, specifically as it relates to teacher indifference or lack of care, contributes to lower levels of at-risk student motivation. According to respondents, teachers must invest the time and work to effectively prepare and set rituals and routines throughout the year.

**Pattern 2: Too rigorous or too easy.** The second pattern that emerged for the theme of indifferent and/or uncaring teacher is too rigorous or too easy instruction. Teachers 7 and 12 explained that effective teachers meet students where they are academically. They made the point that teachers should not just create the same lesson for all students because such lessons fail to be respectful of students’ academic levels. Further, they noted that students demonstrate their discontent to such approaches with a lack of engagement and motivation. Teacher 7 shared this experience:

I teach English and all of my students are at a different point in reading comprehension, in writing, and in attaining other skills. If I create one lesson for everybody, which I have experience doing, the results are terrible. They wouldn’t improve. When it comes to my low-level students, I have to give them activities that they can realistically achieve and
grow. If the work isn’t challenging enough for them, they may feel like I think they are stupid. But it can’t be too challenging or they wouldn’t even attempt it. One time I was teaching vocabulary and I asked the lower performing group to match definitions to words we had studied—other groups had more challenging activities. They weren’t interested in doing this. It seemed like they drew lines without even reading the definitions and got nearly all wrong. When I reflected, I believe that they may have felt disrespected or that the work was elementary because of the matching. When I asked one of the boys, the students told me that it was boring. But based on what I saw, it looked like they felt inadequate.

Similar to Teacher 7, Teacher 8 made a strong point about the need for teachers to use data to meet student needs. Speaking passionately, she stated, “Struggling students are the hardest in the class to deal with if you don’t know or care enough about them to do right by them. They take notice if you don’t.” She added, “They want the gold star and the recognition, even if it is a shout out in class. But in order to get them this, you have to come ready to give them experiences that meet their needs and help them move to the next level.”

Adding to the discussion, and in agreement, Teacher 16 asserted that teachers who fail to tier their lessons appropriately, based on student levels, experience the most problems. She reflected on lessons learned from observing a former colleague.

So she was a new teacher in the school. I think it was sometime in October when she came to replace a teacher on FMLA. Her classroom was right next door to my classroom and the disruption and noise coming from that room was crazy. I had to walk in and assist at times. And administrators had to come to her room every day to assist. When we got to
talking in a meeting, she shared how angry and stressed she was and blamed the students, saying that they have no discipline. I volunteered to observe her lesson and give feedback. When I saw her teach, I understood why they kids hated the class. She made the math so hard for the kids. She taught from the front of the class really quick. Even I couldn’t follow. All the kids had to practice the work individually. They didn’t and started talking and goofing around.

Teacher 16 explained that after observing that lesson, she realized the importance of differentiation and shared it with her colleagues. She underscored the point that teachers who do not care, fail at the kind of learning experiences that helps them to thrive.

All teachers were not in total agreement regarding the negative impact that “too challenging” instruction could have on at-risk student motivation. Teachers 11 and 15 underscored that some at-risk students struggle because teachers coddle them and have low expectations. Teacher 11 stated the following:

While struggling students push back on hard work, they really do need the challenge.

We have to set high expectations for them to rise to and provide the support for them to meet it. I work with my students in small groups and have seen them grow.

In summary, several teachers felt strongly about providing “just right” instruction to at-risk students. In other words, the learning objective should not be so challenging that it cannot be attained or so easy that students fail to grow. They noted that when this is not done properly, student motivation for learning is negatively affected as demonstrated by disruption and a lack of interest. While there was some disagreement regarding the need to create very challenging
lessons, there was no disagreement that caring teachers support their struggling students academically.

**Pattern 3: Demeaning or disrespectful.** The final pattern that emerged for the theme Indifferent and/or Uncaring Teacher is Demeaning and Disrespectful. There was agreement across all interviews that teachers who disrespect and demean their students inspire dislike and significantly inhibit motivation for learning. “It is normal to respect and be respected,” Teacher 12 stated. “The teacher who doesn’t know this creates a toxic class environment for all students,” she added.

Teacher 5 shared the following insight:

Well, the only thing I really see that will cause a bad reaction is if they felt a negative vibe coming from the teacher. They feel just as much as anybody. They know whether you care about them or you don’t care about them and that’s a lot of what’s going on with the kids in this school, because they never felt like anybody cared about them. So they get very hurt if you show any kind of bad attitude with them. If you disrespect them in any way, whether intentionally or unintentionally, they will think you don’t care and act up. It's really sad.

In much the same way, Teachers 1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 15, 16, and 18 agreed that because struggling students have experienced failure, they are especially sensitive to teacher communication and are very perceptive to any sign of disrespect. Teacher 3 shared the following experience:

Okay, so it was my first or second year of teaching, I was attempting to put students in groups. I started calling out the groups for students to work in. The mistake I made
was putting students who were known to struggle in the same group instead of heterogeneously grouping them. It was a mistake. They questioned why they were placed in the group, and it definitely affected our rapport. They weren’t happy.

Teacher 3 advised that while homogeneously grouping struggling students is beneficial, it is equally important not to “make students feel self-conscious and embarrass them.”

To summarize, all respondents shared that disrespecting or demeaning struggling students, in any way, significantly inhibits their motivation for learning. According to the teachers in this study, this is true regardless of intention. Thus, teachers need to err on the side of caution, in their communication, ensuring that it is always respectful and motivating.

To sum up, for the second research question, two themes were distinguished: teacher-centered learning approaches and indifferent and/or uncaring teacher. Specific patterns emerged for each theme. For the theme teacher-centered learning approaches, the patterns included lecturing, individual remediation, and summative assessments. The patterns for the second theme of indifferent and/or uncaring teacher included poor classroom management, too rigorous or too easy, and demeaning or disrespectful.

**Research Question 3 and Related Theme**

The third research question asks the following: How, if at all, can teachers effectively motivate urban eighth-grade at-risk youth? In response to the aligned interview question regarding the instructional strategies/approaches that have been effective in motivating struggling learners, teachers repeated strategies shared in Research Question 1 and presented in this chapter. Among these strategies were providing incentives and rewards, modeling instruction, projects, hands-on learning activities, and using technology, among others. However,
when teachers were asked about ways to motivate struggling students that may not directly relate to teacher instructional practice, responses indicated strong perceptions of several non-instructional strategies/approaches that inspire motivation for at-risk students. After the researcher conducted multiple close reads of participant responses and synthesized key findings, one theme emerged: building meaningful relationships with students.

**Theme: Building Meaningful Relationships with Students**

The theme that emerged for Research Question 3 was building meaningful relationships with students. What does this mean? As teachers explained, building relationships means creating the conditions for sharing stories and engaging in mutual, honest communication. A majority of teachers underscored the importance of building strong relationships with struggling students and continually nurturing the relationships to inspire trust. “Kids want to build relationships with their teachers. They hate feeling like they are one of many. They want to feel special. They want advice on how to deal with struggles in and out of school,” Teacher 14 noted.

Social Studies teacher, Teacher 17, asserted that he recognizes and values his students and their lives. Chuckling, he stated the following:

Even if they get on your nerves—your very last nerves—I still want to make a connection to see something good in them and let them know that I see it. And I think once they realize it, you see their whole being and then they open up.

Two main patterns emerged for this theme: being accessible outside of work, and sharing personal stories.
**Pattern 1: Being accessible outside of work.** Several teachers provided detailed insight into what it means to be accessible outside of work. Responses from Teachers 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 16, and 17 are shared below:

Teachers 4, 10, 11, and 16 attend student events. Teacher 4 stated, “Well, I know their performing arts, and I make sure that I go to their shows. Whether they dance, play an instrument; whatever it is, I make sure I attend. I’ve been to their Spring and Winter concerts.” Teacher 11 agreed, adding, “These kids are really excited about what they do in their P.A.s. So, just talking to them about it and also attending or showing interest in some of the things they are doing and maybe going to see what they’ve done, shows them that you support them.” In a similar way, Teacher 10 shared that “visiting their games, their recitals, celebrating their birthday parties, going to Sweet 16s, what have you” goes a long way to build relationships.

Teacher 10 added that being available after school allows continued communication and strengthening of relationships. She explained as follows:

Build relationships; be accessible, like outside of the school day. If a student wanted to reach you outside, not necessarily for personal conversations, be there. They like if they can say, "Can you help me with my homework?" or "I'm emailing you; I have questions about my homework," or whatever.”

Teacher 5 spends time in his students’ neighborhood and advises other teachers to do the same. Speaking enthusiastically, he stated the following:

You could ride through the neighborhood to get them to see you after school as not just a teacher, but like a real person. Sometimes, I just come to this neighborhood just to go to the store so they can see me walk around in the store. They know my car so they’ll try to
run over and say hello. Sometimes they will shout out my name. Stuff like that they remember. And then the next day, they have a whole different perspective on how they’re going to talk to me. It is funny when they ask, “Who was that person in the car with you?” So we get to go through all that and they feel the closeness and now that they feel like they know me, they’ll do more things for me.

Being involved in a club at her school, Teacher 9 shared that she, along with colleagues, have been taking students out to events and on trips; and it has proven beneficial.

Clubs! I'm involved in a club. I'm involved in a sister-to-sister club and we took the kids out to a formal dinner, the cinema, and that was very effective. Like I said, taking them out on trips is very important to our students and it makes them know that we care. They love getting the exposure. A lot of times they don't see outside of their neighborhood. And so getting that information to them is crucial.

In summary, the teacher respondents shared that to effectively build meaningful relationships with students, teachers should commit to being there for students past the regular work hours. They noted that teachers can attend student events, communicate via email, spend time in the neighborhood, and provide opportunities for learning outside of the classroom such as field trips.

**Pattern 2: Sharing personal stories.** The second pattern that emerged for the theme of building meaningful relationships with students was sharing personal stories. Throughout the interviews, there was strong agreement among many teachers that to inspire motivation within students, teachers must create an environment of trust that allows the mutual sharing of stories
between teacher and students. Starting the discussion is Teacher 1, who passionately stated the following:

You must get to know your students. Get to know the students in terms of their interests and their lives. I think trying to understand some of the struggles that they experience is so important. I think being able to inspire them, and not just as a person or as a professional but as someone who cares, can show them how we conduct ourselves to become a professional. They admire this and are inspired.

Teacher 3 discussed the importance of being a support to students and showing that you care. She proudly stated that she learned all of her students’ names on the first day of class.

Just be there for them. Listen to them. Just let them know that you care—even just remembering their names and something about who they are—I learned all my students’ names the first day. And they never have a teacher do that, and they are like, "Wow, you cared enough to remember." I'm like, "Well, you know, you are my child for the next however many months that you have me, like it's my job to take care of you." And for me, you know, having high standards, even though they don’t like it now, I have every, well almost every, single student come back and they say, “Thank you.”

In much the same way, Teacher 7 expressed that she also tells her students that they are her children and represent her.

I let my students know who I am and where I came from. I tell them that when I see them I see my own children; and what I want for my own children, I want for them. Another thing I do is tell them that when the principal sees them in the hallway acting up, he
doesn’t call their parents, he calls me. I tell them don’t represent me poorly. When I do that, they know I’m not trying to beat up on them; they know where I’m coming from.

Teachers 4, 8, 12, and 14 have frequent conversations with their students. Teacher 4 expressed that recognizing new changes in her students’ dress or overall presentation has helped her get closer to them. Talking about a new hairdo or just saying you like their sneakers or if it is their birthday, you wish them a happy birthday helps.

According to Teacher 8, discussions with students about future goals and aspirations have helped her build strong relationships. She added that she “relates their learning to real life experiences.” Teacher 14 shared that she always tells them they could do better. She makes positives phone calls home and shares personal stories about her life to win their trust. Further, Teacher 12 shared a similar experience,

I have this special relationship with them, maybe because I have my master’s degree in guidance and counseling. Yeah. I’m kind of into their lives. They tend to come and tell everything. They confide in me and tell me very private things. And I help them to work through things.

Outside of sharing personal stories and being accessible outside of work, some teachers noted other ways that they build relationships with students. Teacher 10 stated the following:

Some of my students struggle because of poverty issues. And in the past, I bought kids clothes; I got them a meal with their parent’s permission. I have two girls that are graduating high school. When they were in my class, I bought them an entire wardrobe because they just couldn't focus due to low self-esteem from not being clean. And I was old school with it; I was like, "Listen, you just can't sit in my class and feel
uncomfortable and the kids picking on you. I'll buy you some clothes.” So I bought them clothes, and their attitudes towards learning changed.

Sharing a similar story, Teacher 17 noted the following:

I know there is a teacher in our building who actually keeps a lot of basic goods like toothbrushes, toothpastes, shampoo. I mean, she has like a whole bunch of stuff for those kids who really just need some stuff and don’t want to say anything. The kids can win the stuff; and for a lot of kids, that’s a really big deal. So, this is stuff that teachers do all the time that kind of go unnoticed; but for certain students that’s a really, really big deal.

One teacher told me one of her former students came back and is trying to start a photography business, and she wants to support him, so she invested $100 in certain equipment. Stuff like that is important.

Adding a new perspective, Teacher 15 raised the point of the importance of teacher attendance. She states, “Show up every day. Teacher attendance is important. If you don't show up, then they feel like you don't care. So show up every day and be fully present.”

All in all, teachers emphasized the importance of building relationships through the mutual sharing of personal stories. For a majority of teachers, this meant getting to know their students and helping them work through barriers to their success.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of teachers of urban Eighth-grade at-risk students regarding the classroom factors that facilitate and inhibit motivation to succeed. This chapter presented teacher perceptions, using verbatim quotations in
response to open-ended interview questions that were associated with the three guiding research questions. For each research question, after I examined the data, themes emerged.

For Research Questions 1 and 3, which relates to factors that facilitate motivation, the data revealed the following themes: caring and motivated teacher, student-directed learning, and building meaningful relations with students. As it pertains to being a caring and motivated teacher, respondents shared the importance of teachers being prepared for class, modeling enthusiasm, and recognizing and celebrating student success. For student-directed learning, teachers noted that providing relevant instruction, hands-on activities, choice in learning, and integrating technology inspire student motivation. Finally, teachers underscored the importance of building meaningful relationships with students and offered that being accessible outside of work and sharing personal stories can facilitate such relationships.

For Research Question 2, which relates to factors that inhibit motivation, the two themes were teacher-centered learning approaches and indifferent and/or uncaring teacher. Teachers distinguished practices like lecturing, frequent summative assessments, and individual remediation to be strong inhibiting factors. In addition, as it pertains to indifferent and/or uncaring teacher, teachers brought attention to poor classroom management, instruction that is too rigorous or too easy, and demeaning or disrespecting students.

Chapter V discusses how the study can advance the literature in the area of motivating at-risk students. In addition, I suggest recommendations for future research and policy and describe the perceived impact on educational leadership practice.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This study responded to a dearth of literature in the area of motivating urban at-risk students to excel academically. The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of teachers of urban eighth-grade at-risk students in one New Jersey school district regarding the classroom factors that facilitate and inhibit student motivation to excel. The study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What classroom factors, if any, facilitate motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth?
2. What classroom factors, if any, inhibit motivation to excel academically for urban eighth-grade at-risk youth?
3. How, if at all, can teachers effectively motivate urban eighth-grade at-risk youth?

Employing a qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews with 18 teachers of urban eighth-grade students, each research question was addressed and the key findings, organized according to distinct themes and patterns, were shared in the previous chapter.

This chapter aspires to make sense of the collected data through analysis and discussion of the key findings as well as the data’s alignment to relevant literature and the study’s conceptual framework. Recommendations for future research and practice are presented.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm much of the literature in the area of student motivation, in general, and narrow the dearth of literature in student motivation related to the
The study’s target population—urban at-risk students. The thematic findings for each research question are visually represented below.

![Thematic Findings for Each Research Question](image)

**Figure 4.** Thematic Findings for Each Research Question.

### Research Question 1 Conclusions

**Conclusion 1: Caring and Motivated Teachers Motivate Urban At-risk Eighth-Grade Students**

The findings of this study revealed that teachers who are caring and exude motivation for teaching and learning motivate at-risk eighth-grade students. Teacher respondents distinguished three observable high-impact characteristics and actions of caring and motivated teachers: (1) they invest the time to effectively prepare high quality, responsive learning experiences for their students, (2) they model enthusiasm for teaching and learning, and (3) they consistently recognize and celebrate student success.
According to respondents, to prepare high quality, responsive lessons requires a significant investment of time to research and plan the most interesting activities that would engage students from the moment they walk into class. Mental preparedness was also emphasized. Teachers explained that developing the mental stamina to be truly present every day, not just physically but mentally, sends a message of care. Teachers in this study explained that at-risk students are very perceptive and can quickly detect a teacher who isn’t 100% mentally present. Students’ response to such teachers is negative—noted as disruptive behavior and an overall lack of interest in learning. Furthermore, teachers emphasized that caring and motivated teachers model motivation for teaching and learning. They display energy and excitement, which, in turn, inspires the same emotions from their students. Finally, caring and motivated teachers consistently recognize and celebrate student success. While tangible rewards like stickers, certificates, money, among other things, were noted to be effective ways to recognize and celebrate at-risk students, teachers overwhelmingly underscored the effectiveness of praise. They explained that at-risk students are not accustomed to getting praised for their work. Thus, when a teacher gives at-risk students words of affirmation and calls or sends home a positive letter, student motivation increases.

Consulting the literature, we noted alignment to this study’s findings in the work of Lam, Cheng, and Ma (2009). They found a direct and indirect association between teacher and student motivation. Among their significant findings was the idea that when teachers reported higher intrinsic motivation for teaching and learning, their students perceived more instructional support which was associated positively with student intrinsic motivation. Lam, Cheng, and Ma (2009) offered that the strong correlation between teacher intrinsic and student intrinsic motivation is
potentially influenced by students’ observation of their teacher’s inherent enjoyment for the learning process.

As seen in Lam, Cheng, and Ma (2009) and this study, teachers of urban at-risk students are encouraged to effectively model motivation for teaching and learning and express care for their students. As noted, the benefit to urban at-risk students is the increase of motivation for learning.

Conclusion 2: Learning That Is Student-directed Motivates Urban At-risk Eighth-Grade Students

The findings from this study show overwhelming support for the ability of student-directed learning approaches to motivate urban at-risk students to want to learn. Teacher respondents underscored the benefits of urban at-risk students making decisions about their own learning. They offered that the learning should be relevant to students’ lives and experiences, provide choice, be hands-on, and utilizes technology.

Relevance of instruction was described as critical if teachers hope to inspire motivation and increase the quality of student work. Teachers explained that urban at-risk students feel more involved in the learning process when they can relate to what they are learning, as it inspires confidence to share their experiences and unique skills. Teachers offered that projects provide such an opportunity to ensure relevance and empower students.

Further, there was a wealth of support for choice in learning. Many teachers equated choice to giving students control of their learning, which they noted is highly desired by urban at-risk students. In addition, choice allows students to work to their strengths as they use their skills and talents to demonstrate learning. In a similar way, hands-on activities were celebrated.
From using manipulatives in mathematics to engaging all senses in science, urban at-risk students were described as enjoying activities that allow them to use their hands in the process to create and demonstrate learning. Finally, there was tremendous support for technology in learning with this population. Technology allows more ownership of the learning process, as students are comfortable with its use since they use it in their daily personal lives. However, teachers stressed that using technology in repetitive ways, as is evident in some programs that remediate deficient skills, is not motivating. Instead, urban at-risk students are motivated when technology is used to help them create and enhance their own skills.

There is support for these findings in the literature surrounding student motivation (Dicintio & Gee, 1999; Blackburn & Armstrong, 2011; Solberg, Caristrom, Howard, & Jones, 2007; Knesting, 2008; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky 2009; Holloway & Salinitri, 2010). Dicintio and Gee’s (1999) study, in particular, provides strong confirmation that at-risk students are motivated when learning is student-directed. They investigated the relationship between the quality of instructional tasks to students’ level of motivation and found a significant association between student motivation and the level of control students felt they had over their learning. “Students reported being more involved and more competent when they perceived greater control over decisions and choices; conversely, they reported being less bored, less confused, and less interested in doing something else (p. 234). As such, they offer that the optimal learning environment for at-risk students is one that is motivationally adaptive and provides students with control over their learning. They add, “More so than traditional students, at-risk students need to learn the skills of self-determination and adaptive motivation in school learning—characteristics that cannot be imparted through motivational practices that control and coerce students (p. 235).
As mentioned, the findings of this study support and confirm Dicintio and Gee’s (1999) research. Thus, it is important to take note of this positive relationship between giving urban at-risk students control over decisions related to their learning and their level of motivation. As teachers asserted in this study, when learning is relevant, hands-on, gives choice and integrates technology, urban at-risk students perceive greater ownership of the learning process and student motivation increases.

**Research Question 2 Conclusions**

**Conclusion 1: Teacher-centered Approaches Inhibit Urban At-risk Eighth-Grade Student Motivation**

Kohn (2010) boldly asserted that the one sure thing that teachers have the ability to do, with respect to student motivation, is destroy it. He identified seven things that teachers do that destroy student motivation towards reading. These include quantifying reading assignments, making students write reports, isolating them, focusing on skills, offering incentives, preparing students for tests, and restricting student choices. The findings of this study confirm this overarching insight and add support for some of the practices that Kohn (2010) identified.

In the current study, teacher respondents felt strongly about avoiding certain teacher-centered practices that they note inhibit motivation for urban at-risk students. Among these practices were lecturing, individual remediation, and summative assessments.

Similar to Kohn’s (2010) point about the risk to motivation when teachers restrict student choice, it is important to note that when teachers lecture, students have no control over what they are learning. Instead, the teacher becomes the bearer of information and students the receivers. Teacher respondents explained that lecturing results in passive listening to teacher talk. As a
result, students are bored, which often leads to disruptive behavior and ultimately a general dislike for learning.

In terms of individual remediation, teachers, in this study, noted that urban at-risk students are discouraged to learn when they are isolated in any way for their weaknesses. This is the case when they are forced into remedial learning experiences. Whether such students are working in a small corner in the classroom while their on-grade-level peers move forward in the curriculum, or if they are pulled out for remediation, teachers noted that the attention on their weaknesses contributes to lowered self-esteem, which negatively impacts their learning. Here again, we note alignment to Kohn’s (2010) point about the dangers of isolating students.

The Dicintio and Gee (1999) study also adds support to this point. They assert that, often, at-risk students face “impoverished learning environments” and are victims to learning environments that “perpetuate academic difficulties” (p. 231). These kinds of learning environments, argue Dicintio and Gee (1999), are known for providing instruction that remediates and is compensatory, thereby addressing only lower-level skills.

One thing that teachers recommended to remedy this isolation is adaptive technology programs that remediate deficient skills as well as provide enrichment for mastered skills. This way, all students, regardless of skill level, can be engaged in the same program and get precisely what they need without any indication of who may be behind or ahead.

Finally, teacher respondents underscored the inhibiting effects summative assessments have on urban at-risk student motivation. It was noted that because at-risk students have experienced some degree of academic failure and they struggle with learning, assessments that are perceived high-stakes in any way and counted towards a grade amplify and extend this idea
of failure. When we review Kohn’s (2010) list of inhibiting practices, we again see alignment to this study’s finding in his point about the negative effects of preparing for tests.

**Conclusion 2: Indifferent and/or Uncaring Teachers Inhibit Urban At-risk Eighth-Grade Student Motivation**

In the current study, it was no surprise that teacher respondents passionately stressed the inhibiting effects that an indifferent or uncaring teacher has on student motivation while also underscoring the benefit of a caring teacher. Knesting (2008) makes a similar point. He notes that increasing motivation in the at-risk population does not always require a great deal of resources from teachers; instead, simple things such as being polite and showing students respect in the classroom inspires more engagement. Furthermore, Knesting (2008) found that students “responded to teachers who asked for their opinions and then listened to their answers, and developed supportive relationships with those who maintained high expectations for them and then stayed on their backs as they worked to achieve their goals” (p. 8).

In the current study, teachers identified three key areas that signal a teacher who is indifferent or uncaring. These included poor classroom management, instruction that is too rigorous or too easy, and a teacher who demeans or disrespects students.

Poor classroom management was described as either a teacher’s lack of strategies or a lack of care. Teachers noted that when it is a lack of strategies, teachers who care about their students effectively commit to getting better and they do. However, those who lack care for the needs of urban at-risk students make little effort to create the type of classroom that inspires motivation for learning. The type of classroom that helps student motivation is a well-managed class of high expectations and clear rituals and routines.
Furthermore, teacher respondents highlighted that indifferent and/or uncaring teachers fail to give students the instruction that meets their individual needs. It is deemed either too rigorous or too easy, both of which negatively impact urban at-risk student motivation. Teachers underscored that data must be used to know where students are academically to plan lessons that are differentiated.

Finally, and perhaps one of the most passionate points made throughout the interviews, was the inhibiting impact a disrespectful or demeaning teacher has on urban at-risk student motivation for learning. Teachers emphasized that such teachers inspire a toxic classroom culture for all students. They asserted that because at-risk students have experienced failure, they are very perceptive to teacher communication and anything that can be interpreted as disrespect leads to diminished motivation for learning.

Research Question 3 Conclusion

Conclusion: Teachers Can Effectively Help Motivate Urban At-risk Eighth-Graders by Building Meaningful Relationships

The findings for Research Question 3 underscored the significant role that teachers play in inspiring urban at-risk student motivation for learning. Outside of instructional strategies, teachers overwhelmingly highlighted the importance of building meaningful relationships with urban at-risk students. The experiences teachers shared pointed to two main strategies that facilitate the development of such relationships: being accessible outside of work and sharing personal stories.

In terms of being accessible, teachers related numerous actions that they have taken. These include maintaining communication after school via email, attending student events,
spending time in their students’ neighborhood, and attending or facilitating field trips. These actions provide opportunities to show students that teachers care enough to go above and beyond. For urban at-risk students, demonstrating this commitment ensures deeper trust, buy-in, and ultimately motivation for learning. As it relates to sharing personal stories, teacher respondents emphasized that they get to know their students on a personal level and also share stories about their own lives. They further stressed that simple things go a long way in developing the kinds of relationships that inspire motivation. Teachers are keen to learn names, birthdays, future goals, and aspirations and interests. Teachers further noted that recognizing and complimenting their students on things that are important to them like their fashion or a new hairstyle also works.

These findings confirm other research related to building relationships as a means to inspire motivation within this population (Powell & Marshall, 2011; Holloway & Salinitri, 2010). When we look at the findings from Holloway & Salinitri’s (2010) study, we note the relationship between mentors and at-risk students. The study revealed that in addition to at-risk students feeling that they learned from watching their mentors, they also perceived their mentors as potential confidantes. This positive influence of relationships on at-risk student motivation is worth noting. As teachers gain student trust, they have the opportunity to inspire and ignite at-risk students’ passion for learning.

**Conceptual Framework: Applying Maslow**

Maslow (1943), in his article, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” provided a framework from which to analyze human motivation. In general, he posits that people are motivated by certain categories of needs, which he placed into a hierarchy, with the most immediate and
urgent needs falling at the bottom of the pyramid. He asserts that people only aspire to higher needs on the pyramid when the most basic and fundamental needs are met. The needs are distinguished according to the following categories:

- Category 1 - Physiological (food, shelter, sleep)
- Category 2 - Safety (safety/law and order, protection from the elements, stability)
- Category 3 - Love and Belonging (affectionate relationships with people)
- Category 4 - Esteem (recognition, respect, appreciation, achievement)
- Category 5 - Self Actualization (meeting one's fullest potential)

Maslow’s theory (1943) represents one important lens through which the findings of this study can be interpreted. From the perceptions and experiences of 18 teachers of urban eighth-grade at-risk students regarding the classroom factors that facilitate and inhibit at-risk student motivation, we note that teachers recognize the needs defined by Maslow as inhibiting achievement and provided actionable guidance on how they address many of these needs to inspire motivation.

As was discussed in this study, at-risk students face numerous barriers to achieving success academically. Solberg, Caristrom, Howard, and Jones (2007) distinguished the following: a lack of parental support, low self-efficacy and motivation, and limited positive relationships with peers and teachers. Other noted challenges for urban at-risk students include a history of academic failure and struggle, poverty, broken homes and high-crime neighborhoods. When we align these barriers to Maslow’s Hierarchy, we observe many basic needs. Thus, until we can effectively address these needs, at-risk students are unlikely to aspire to achieve
academically, which we can arguably assert is the category of esteem. Figure 5 shows the alignment of barriers to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.

**Figure 5. Alignment of Barriers to Maslow’s Hierarchy.** Adapted from “A Theory of Human Motivation” by Abraham Maslow, 1943.

The findings of this study support meeting many of these basic needs to inspire motivation for achievement. In terms of physiological needs, many teachers in this study recognize the negative impact such needs have on motivation and shared that they provide basic needs products like deodorant, clothing, toothpaste, and money to some of their students who are most in need. Outside of what teachers are doing, free and reduced lunch programs continue to represent an effective response to poorly fed or hungry children. However, other physiological needs such as ensuring that students have sufficient sleep and wear clean and weather-appropriate clothing continue to be a challenge that goes beyond what teachers and the school can effectively remedy.
Safety needs for this population represent another area of challenge, as a significant percentage of urban at-risk students are products of single parents, some of whom are unemployed, and of high-crime and neighborhoods with limited resources. Here again, schools have the important responsibility of creating a safe and welcoming environment for urban at-risk students. At the classroom level, teachers noted in this study that poorly managed classrooms negatively impact at-risk student motivation. Thus, creating a well-structured classroom of clear rituals and routines promotes feelings of safety.

This study confirmed that meeting love and belonging needs are important to inspiring urban at-risk students to want to achieve. Teachers passionately emphasized the importance of building meaningful relationships with and caring for their students, both of which became important themes in this study. What is also important to note is that in caring for their students, teachers also combat some of the challenges of students rising to the Maslow’s esteem level where the desire for achievement can be found. Teachers in this study noted the importance of speaking respectfully to students, providing more opportunities for success by differentiating the instruction, and consistently recognizing and celebrating student success.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was limited to a small number of teacher participants (18) from one urban school district in New Jersey. The study was further limited to participants who taught the targeted population at the eighth-grade level. In light of these limitations, recommendations for future research are largely focused on replicating the study with a larger sample, in different settings, as well as with actual at-risk student participants. Additional recommendations focus on specific
areas of the findings which, if further investigated, may potentially positively impact teaching and learning for at-risk students.

1. Replicate the study with a larger sample size of teachers of at-risk students to gain deeper and more diverse perceptions of the factors that facilitate and inhibit motivation.

2. As the present study focused on eighth grade, replicate the study with teachers at different academic levels to determine if motivating or inhibiting factors are unique to specific levels or represents all at-risk students regardless of academic level.

3. As the study focused on urban at-risk students, replicate the study with at-risk students in a suburban school district to determine differences, if any, in experiences and perceptions of motivating and inhibiting factors.

4. Replicate the study to investigate the experiences and perceptions of actual at-risk students. This research would be highly valuable, as it responds to a void in the literature and may provide invaluable guidance for educational practice that responds to the needs of this population.

5. Design and conduct a study that explores the impact, if any, of mentoring on at-risk student achievement.

6. Design and conduct a study on the impact, if any, of a specific or multiple adaptive technology remedial program(s) to remediate deficient skills and bring at-risk skills to grade level.

7. Design a comparative study of the impact a classroom teacher has on at-risk student success versus an adaptive technology remedial program.
Recommendations for Policy

Policy that responds to the diverse needs of at-risk students stands to have the greatest impact on creating the circumstance for their academic success and as such should be supported and continually improved. When we refer to Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, we note the urgent and most basic physiological needs of food, sleep, shelter, and the like, as well as other safety, love, and belonging needs that, if not effectively met, drastically inhibit student motivation, even ability to focus on learning. As a large population of urban at-risk students faces many of these basic-needs challenges, programs like the federally supported School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) represent an effective response to student hunger. Several other programs offer a great response to these basic needs and should continue. Among these are programs for low-income families, including the Food Stamp Program, which provides food benefits and Medicaid with health coverage. Child Protection and Permanency (CP&P) within the New Jersey Department of Children and Families is another level of support, which, in addition to investigating and remedying issues of abuse or neglect, offers services, including counseling and parenting classes.

Within the school environment, keeping all students safe should continue to be a top priority. Implementing high-quality emergency operations plans as well as the Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) policy with fidelity should continue to keep all students safe and create an environment conducive to learning.

Finally, as was noted in this study, participating in “high stakes” assessments has an inhibiting effect on urban at-risk student motivation for learning. Despite this dislike for such tests, at-risk students are still required, like all other New Jersey students, to participate in the
yearly administration of the PARCC assessment as well as meet standards/requirement for either PARCC or an alternative test such as the SAT, ACT, Accuplacer, etc., for graduation. While I question if policy will ever speak in favor of at-risk students opting out of these high-stakes tests, I still highly suggest it. As the New Jersey State Board of Education approved updated state regulations for the high school graduation assessments, which noted that in addition to PARCC or an alternative test, students could submit a student portfolio through the Department’s portfolio process, I recommend the same option for at-risk students for determining yearly progress. Student portfolios submitted yearly can provide valuable information about student progress while limiting the negative effects to student motivation for learning that preparing and sitting through a high-stakes test causes.

**Recommendations for Education Leadership Practice**

As this study focused on urban at-risk students, my commentary on the study’s potential impact on education leadership practice is largely focused on urban education leadership, which I assert has its own unique challenges. Citing Barker (1997) again, on leadership, we note his point that leadership inspires people to “visualize a common *summum bonum* [the ultimate end to be pursued] that in turn comes to be manifested in leadership role expectations, which in turn comes to be symbolized by and attributed to the leader” (p. 354). If we consider this explanation of leadership, we can easily see why the task ahead for urban education leaders is an arduous one. The circumstance of at-risk students and their propensity to fail academically cannot be entirely addressed within the education environment as was explained in our application of Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. Yet, urban education leaders are expected to close the achievement gap, as determined by meeting and exceeding standards on high-stakes assessments like the
PARCC. In light of this, urban education leaders must act in ways that they never imagined and are not necessarily delineated in their job description. They must delve deeply into research that provides potential solutions to the pressing issues faced within urban education and be fearless and decisive in decision making to take risks towards inspiring positive change.

This study’s findings distinguished practices and approaches that may have the potential to positively impact the at-risk student population and put them on a course towards high levels of achievement. Urban leaders should consider the following as they determine their strategy to address the low motivation, self-efficacy, and poor academic performance of the at-risk group.

To begin, leaders have significant impact during the hiring process. Thus, leaders must resolve to hire only the most passionate and culturally sensitive teachers who are ready to go above and beyond for their at-risk students. The hiring process, in this case, should not just include an interview but also an observation of potential candidates modeling a lesson with real students. This ensures that no one slips through the cracks based only on an impressive resume and good interview skills.

Furthermore, as this study emphasized the importance of relevance in instruction to facilitating at-risk student motivation, leaders must ensure that the curriculum provides content that is relevant to the lives of the students it is meant to serve. In addition, leaders should also encourage flexibility in implementing the curriculum, specifically as it relates to pacing. This allows teachers to feel empowered to be responsive to the needs of at-risk students.

Providing teachers with job-embedded professional development regarding the challenges at-risk students face and the strategies that work should be a priority to leaders. Such
professional development should be continuous with the goal of developing high functioning teams of teachers capable of steering at-risk students towards success.

At-risk students enjoy using technology to enhance their own talents and skills and create high quality work products, leaders should ensure the consistent implementation of technology within instruction in creative and student-centered ways. To do this, there must be a commitment from leadership to equip schools with appropriate technology in sufficient quantities, with a one-for-one being the ideal. In addition, research-based adaptive technology programs that provide students with targeted instruction should be strongly considered to remedy the deficiencies for students who are significantly behind, typically two or more years behind.

Finally, the heavy focus on summative assessment must be looked at carefully. As this study underscored and other research supported, summative assessments inhibit at-risk student motivation for learning. In light of these findings, leaders are encouraged to move away from the cycle summative benchmarks and towards continuous short formative assessments to determine student needs and apply appropriate instruction. This way, students are given time to effectively engage the course of study, targeted interventions, and build confidence in preparation for what has become a requirement by the state, the yearly PARCC assessment.

Final Thoughts

I introduced this study by describing the many challenges that at-risk students face with motivation for academic success. Guided by the study’s research questions, 18 teacher respondents shared their experiences with at-risk students, distinguishing numerous factors as facilitating or inhibiting urban at-risk student motivation for learning. The hope is that these
findings would add to our understanding of this population and provide specific guidance on how to effectively respond to their unique needs.
References


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Appendix A

Letter of Solicitation
LETTER OF SOLICITATION

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Tabina Lyte-Adam, a doctoral candidate within the College of Education and Human Services at Seton Hall University. Under the mentorship of Dr. Barbara Strobert, I am embarking on dissertation research focused on motivating students who struggle academically to improve performance. The title of the study is: A Case Study: The Perceptions of Teachers of Urban 8th Grade At-Risk Students In One New Jersey School District Regarding the Classroom Factors That Facilitate and Inhibit Student Motivation To Excel Academically.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions of teachers of urban eighth-grade students who struggle academically regarding the classroom factors that facilitate or inhibit their motivation to excel. It is hoped that through such a study, educators may gain key insight about the motivation of at-risk learners so that they can effectively respond and improve academic performance of struggling learners.

Participants will be engaged in one interview with the researcher lasting no longer than 45 minutes. It is expected that all interviews and follow-up will be conducted during the period immediately following IRB review and approval: February 1 –March 15, 2017.

All interviews will be conducted within the school environment in a location that is convenient for the participant. Interviews may be conducted via phone if needed. Interview questions are attached for your review. There are no risks for participating in the study. If there is a need to clarify any information received during the interviews, the researcher will reach out to the participant. All interviews will be transcribed and analyzed by the researcher and the findings will be reported in the dissertation document.

Participation in the study is strictly voluntary and there is no compensation for participating in the study. However, through shared participant perceptions, the literature on motivating struggling learners may be advanced and educators may be provided with targeted information to improve at-risk student motivation to excel.

Teacher confidentiality and privacy will be a priority in the study. To achieve this, no real names will be used in the dissertation document.

All collected data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home and systematically destroyed after three years.

For further information, please feel free to contact Tabina Lyte-Adam, Principal Researcher at 973-444-3622, tabinalyte@gmail.com, or Dr. Barbara Strobert, Dissertation Mentor, at barbara.strobert@shu.edu, (973) 275-2324.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Tabina Lyte-Adam
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Researcher’s affiliation: You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Tabina Lyte-Adam, doctoral student in the College of Education and Human Services at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey. Mrs. Lyte-Adam is in the Ed.D. program in Seton Hall’s department of Educational Leadership, Management and Policy.

Purpose of the Research and Duration of Subject’s Participation: The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions of teachers of urban eighth-grade students who struggle academically regarding the classroom factors that facilitate or inhibit their motivation to excel. It is hoped that through such a study, the limited literature surrounding urban at-risk student motivation will be advanced and educators may gain key insight to effectively respond and improve academic performance for this population. Participants will be engaged in one interview lasting no longer than 45 minutes. It is expected that all interviews and follow-up will be conducted during the period immediately following IRB review and approval: February 1, 2017 – March 15, 2017.

Research Procedures: Teachers who agree to participate in the study will be engaged in at least one face-to-face interview conducted by the researcher. It is estimated that interviews will take no longer than 45 minutes and will focus on classroom factors that both inspire and inhibit their motivation to excel. All interviews will be conducted within the school environment in a location that is comfortable for the participant. This may include a vacant classroom, conference room and/or media center. Interviews may be conducted via telephone if needed.

Instrument: The researcher prepared open-ended interview questions to solicit teacher perceptions about the classroom factors that facilitate and inhibit student motivation to excel academically. These questions are attached for your review. The interview questions have been reviewed by a jury of highly qualified teachers, and a committee of Seton Hall University professors, including the study’s advisor, Dr. Barbara Strobert.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. At any point in the research, a participant is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation with no penalty or loss of benefit to which the participant is otherwise entitled within his/her school district.

Anonymity: Anonymity is maintained throughout the study, as no real names will be used to identify participants, the school district, or individual school for which the teacher is placed.

Confidentiality: Confidentiality is a top priority in this study. Thus, all interview recordings will be secured in a locked cabinet in the researchers home and systematically destroyed after three years of the study’s completion.

Records: All recorded interview responses will be kept confidential. Only the researcher and Seton Hall University committee member, including the study’s faculty advisor may have access to student recordings.

Risks/Discomforts to the Subject: There are no anticipated risks to participants.

Benefits to the Subject: While there may be no immediate benefit to participants, it is anticipated that the findings of this study may provide educators with key insight about the academic motivation of urban at-risk students so that they may respond to the needs of such learners and improve academic performance.

Compensation: No compensation will be provided to participants.

Alternate procedures: There are no alternate procedures identified.

Contact information: For further information about the research study and the research subject’s rights, please contact:
Researcher: Tabina Lyte-Adam, Graduate Student, Ed.D. Program
Seton Hall University, College of Education and Human Services
Department of Educational Leadership Management and Policy
400 South Orange Avenue, South Orange, NJ 07079, Phone: 973-444-3622

Researcher’s Faculty Advisor: Dr. Barbara Strobert, Faculty
Seton Hall University, College of Education and Human Services
Department of Educational Leadership Management and Policy
400 South Orange Avenue, South Orange, NJ 07079, Phone: 973-275-2324

Institutional Review Board (IRB): Dr. Mary Ruzicka, Director
Seton Hall University, Presidents Hall Room 325
400 South Orange Avenue, South Orange, NJ 07079, Phone: 973-313-6314

Permission: By signing below, you indicate that you have read and understand all information provided on this form and consent for your child to participate in this study and be audio recorded during the interview.

__________________________________            ___
Participant                                  Date

Copy of Signed/Dated Consent Form
Please note that you will be given a copy of this signed and dated informed consent form.
Appendix C

IRB Approval Letter
January 25, 2017

Tabina Lyte-Adam

Dear Ms. Lyte Adam,

The Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved as submitted under expedited review your research proposal entitled "A Case Study: The Perceptions of Teachers of Urban 8th Grade At-Risk Students in One New Jersey School District Regradng the Classroom Factors That". The IRB reserves the right to recall the proposal at any time for full review.

Enclosed for your records are the signed Request for Approval form, stamped Letter of Solicitation, and the stamped original Consent Form. Make copies only of these stamped forms.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

According to federal regulations, continuing review of already approved research is mandated to take place at least 12 months after this initial approval. You will receive communication from the IRB Office for this several months before the anniversary date of your initial approval.

Thank you for you cooperation.

In harmony with federal regulations, none of the investigators or research staff involved in the study took part in the final decision.

Sincerely,

Mary F. Ruzicka, Ph.D.
Professor
Director, Institutional Review Board

cc: Dr. Barbara Strobert

Office of Institutional Review Board
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