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Disengagement of Male Students in Remediated ELA Classes

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DISENGAGEMENT OF MALE STUDENTS IN REMEDIATED ELA CLASSES

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research was to examine the disengagement of male students in remediated English Language Arts (ELA) classes. Male students are disproportionately represented in remediated ELA classes, which indicates that male students are not progressing in their literacy skills at the same rate as females. Data was gathered from an ELA section of male students through a Google survey, a group interview, and two observations of students in a co-taught class. The purpose of these data collection methods was to understand the experiences of male students to determine the source of their disengagement. A focus group with eight ELA teachers also provided insight on teacher perceptions of their male students in remediated ELA classes. Motivation theory and gender schema theory were the theoretical frameworks used to understand this issue. Motivation theory posits that people accomplish tasks when they feel effort expended to complete the task is worth the reward. Also, people complete tasks when they have an intrinsic desire because they see the importance in the task. Gender schema theory holds that people undergo sex-typing at an early age and, as a result, behave in ways which are consistent with male and female gender roles.

The data indicated that male students do not feel motivated to learn in ELA classes because they do not see the relevance in the material being taught. Male students also indicated that their conflicted homelives often impact their school lives. Teacher responses indicated that male students in remediated ELA classes are challenging to teach

because they exhibit many off task behaviors. However, neither male students nor their

teachers felt there was gender bias occurring in the classroom.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My fifth period freshmen English class was a constant source of frustration. Every day students entered my classroom and proceeded to complain. They did not like anything we were reading, and they routinely asked disruptive questions to derail the lesson. As soon as I would begin the day's agenda, students would get out of their seats to sharpen pencils or to throw something in the trash. Students routinely submitted assignments late and with little attention to detail. I could not understand what was going on, and then it occurred to me that these disruptive behaviors were coming from my male students who overwhelmingly outnumbered the female students in class. I began to wonder why these behaviors were occurring from male students and why male students were disproportionately represented in remediated English Language Arts (ELA) classes.

For the past 14 years, I have taught English in the West Shore School District at Red Land High School to ninth and tenth grade students in the small community in which I live. Teaching is the most rewarding and demanding job I have ever held. Even though I love my job and enjoy working with my students, I also acknowledge that not all students enter the classroom ready and willing to learn, which sometimes creates frustration for both me and my students. Student ability levels vary greatly from class to class, and I sometimes struggle to find ways to differentiate the instruction while managing student behavior. The public high school where I teach is located in a suburban area with most of the students coming from White, middle-class families. I teach five sections of students

each day in either Level 1 or Level 2 designated classes. Level 1 students are typically college bound, self-motivated, grade-conscious students. Level 2 students, however, typically struggle academically and exhibit behavioral issues or poor study habits. Generally, Level 2 students enter the workforce after graduation since their classes are not intended to prepare them for college. Rather, the focus in a Level 2 class is usually remediation. As a result, teaching Level 2 classes requires more energy and more patience because I am constantly attempting to remediate learning deficiencies while increasing engagement with the material. My colleagues and I spend considerable time discussing ways to engage Level 2 students because these classes can be difficult to manage. Level 2 classes are usually louder and more off-task than Level 1 classes. These students have trouble staying in their seats and are distracted easily. I often find myself thinking that teaching Level 2 classes is like herding cats: we are never all going in the same direction at the same time.

Recently, I had what I refer to as a lightbulb moment. I was teaching a small group of Level 2 freshmen, which was unusual because normally my class sizes are around 28–30 students. This class, however, consisted of only 14 students. At first, I was excited to teach such a small group because I figured that the students would be easier to manage, and we could accomplish more work. Unfortunately, I was completely wrong. After only one week of school, this small class became the one section I dreaded to teach, and I began to wonder why this was the case. It finally occurred to me that the classroom was overwhelmingly comprised of boys. In fact, 11 of the 14 students were boys. I began to look at the composition of my other sections of students, and I was shocked to discover that, in Level 1 sections, the girls far outnumbered the boys. However, in all of my Level

2 sections, male students comprised the majority of the class. After some informal research, I learned that this gender distribution was taking place in all English classes and across the curriculum. Girls were preparing for college in all subject areas, and boys were falling behind.

As I began this school year, my classroom demographic repeated the same pattern, a pattern which did not exist 14 years ago when I began teaching. My Level 1 classes consisted mostly of female students and my Level 2 classes consisted mostly of male students. The implications of this shift are alarming to me. Not only are our male students underperforming female students and falling behind, but they are also positioning themselves to enter the workforce instead of college, thereby limiting their earning potential. In fact, the number of female students graduating from college far surpasses the number of male students (Fortin et al., 2015). As I considered this shift in demographics, I began to wonder about my male students and their feelings in my classroom. I began to ask myself all sorts of questions: What is happening to our boys? What changes have taken place in the classroom that have caused our male students to feel disengaged and fall behind? How can schools reverse this trend? How are teachers contributing to this growing gender gap? These are the questions I continually ponder and hoped to answer in this study.

Problem of Practice

There is a disproportionate number of male students in remediated ELA classes, creating a gender gap in the skills these boys need to be successful. Male students in Level 2 ELA classes are typically disengaged, resulting in reduced achievement. In fact, this sociocultural trend is noted throughout the nation and has resulted in literature that is

"replete with research studies conducted on the achievement of males" (Jackson &

Hilliard, 2013, p. 311). Gender bias—sometimes referred to as gender advantage or

disadvantage—may contribute to this problem. In the early 1990s, a considerable amount

of attention by researchers was given to the gender inequality female students

experienced in schools (Gurian, 2011); however, since this time, the pendulum has swung

in the other direction and now male students are experiencing a gender bias in the

classroom. This gender bias has alarming long-term effects, such as fewer male students

graduating from college. In fact, "women now outnumber men among recent college

graduates in most industrialized countries" (Fortin et al., 2015, p. 549). The high school

classroom is the last chance teachers have to intervene and re-engage boys in learning

literacy skills; therefore, teaching practices in the ELA classroom must alter in order to

address the needs of male students, re-engage them in class, and prepare them for life

after high school.

The gender gap in literacy continues to grow and is due in part to teaching

practices in the classroom. ELA teachers are often unaware their lessons cater to female

students. The fictional reading material frequently used in the classroom appeals to

female rather than male students (Marks, 2008; Taylor, 2004). By expanding our

definitions of literacy and including other types of texts, like informational pieces,

teachers could possibly engage male students (Taylor, 2004). Additionally, male students

prefer competition and movement in the classroom (Gurian, 2011), but many classrooms

are now built on teamwork and collaboration with peers, which caters to a female

audience. Additionally, boys frequently set low expectations for themselves (Fortin et al.,

2018), which looks like a lack of motivation but may actually be lower self-esteem.

Contributing to a lack of motivation is the idea that many boys do not see themselves as readers (Bozack, 2011). Furthermore, students tend to believe that the teacher shares the same viewpoint about their reading abilities (Bozack, 2011), which reinforces their negative thoughts. This negative self-image may contribute to a lack of motivation and requires positive feedback from the teacher; however, many teachers may misinterpret this low self-image as apathy.

Research in the area of brain development also indicates males are predisposed to learn and behave in distinctive ways. Surging hormones in teenage boys often make them impulsive and distracted (Gurian, 2011). In the classroom, this phenomenon results in behavioral problems and disruptions to teaching; therefore, boys require more attention and are often viewed as behavioral problems. At my school, students with perceived behavioral problems are tracked in remedial, Level 2 courses. Once a student is tracked in a Level 2 class, it is extremely difficult to move into a higher level. Instead of viewing boys as problems in the classroom, educators need to understand male learning preferences and work to eliminate gender bias in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

This action research was guided by two major theoretical frameworks: motivation theory and gender schema theory. Each of these theories will be discussed in this section.

Motivation Theory

Male students in remediated ELA classes at Red Land High School often demonstrate a lack of motivation in the classroom. These students are more likely to be disengaged, which frequently results in poor grades. Gopalan et al. (2017) stated that motivation is the "process to make a start, [that] guides, and maintains goal-oriented

behaviours" and it essentially "leads individuals to take action to achieve a goal or fulfill a need or expectation" (p. 1). Students who demonstrate motivation in the classroom, therefore, work to gain new knowledge and achieve good grades. Those without this desire quickly fall behind. As a result, motivation impacts both the degree of student engagement with the material presented by the teacher and student contribution to class (Gopalan et al., 2017).

There are two major motivational ideologies that impact all motivational theories: expectancy-value theory and intrinsic-extrinsic motivational theory (Irvine, 2018). Expectancy-value theory "posits that students' choice of tasks, persistence, and achievement depends on two factors: Students' beliefs about their probability of success and the value they place on the task" (Irvine, 2018, p. 2). In other words, if a student believes or expects that he has little chance of being successful with a given task, he is less likely to engage in this task. In fact, the more a student believes he will be successful in completing a task, the more likely he will be to engage in this task. Noted researchers Wigfield and Eccles (2000) proposed the idea of expectancy-value theory and, through their research, demonstrated that student self-efficacy plays a major role in motivation; students need to believe they have the ability to be successful. In fact, they found students' "beliefs about their ability and expectations for success are the strongest predictors of subsequent grades" (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, p. 77). Unfortunately, they also noted that, as children grow older, their beliefs about their abilities grow more negative, and as a result, students begin to avoid certain tasks because they no longer value them. This is evident in remediated Level 2 ELA classrooms at my school. Students enter the classroom already believing that their ability level in reading and writing is not

strong because the class is labeled as such; it is a remediated class for students who struggle. Consequently, their expectation of success is low from the first day of class. As a result, students avoid engaging in class, and they often fail to complete their work.

Furthermore, Wigfield and Eccles (as cited in Irvine, 2018) identified that there are four dimensions to the value aspect of the expectancy-value theory: attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value, and cost. Attainment value refers to level of importance the student attributes to the learning task. As a result, if the student finds the task unimportant, he will find little value in it. Intrinsic value refers to the degree to which the student actually enjoys the task. Utility refers to how the student attributes the task's relevance to future goals. Finally, cost refers to the tradeoff the student must make when engaging in the task. Essentially, students wonder if the task requires too much time or energy that could be devoted to a more enjoyable task (Irvine, 2018). Ultimately, students weigh, or value, the learning task based on these dimensions. Students who become frustrated or annoyed by a learning task become less motivated to engage in this learning in the future (Gopalan et al., 2017).

Intrinsic-extrinsic motivational theory addresses the reasons students are motivated to complete a task. Intrinsic motivation is learning for the sake of learning without an external reward (Irvine, 2018). Intrinsically motivated students will spend more time on a task, monitor their own learning, demonstrate more creativity, and complete more challenging tasks. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is completing a task with the expectation of earning a reward (Irvine, 2018). The grading system in most schools is an extrinsic motivator. Students earn a reward, a grade, for successfully completed work. Unfortunately, current research indicates that extrinsic motivation

contributes to the demotivation of students in the classroom because students are not interested in the tasks and, therefore, do not want the reward (Irvine, 2018). The ELA classroom is built on the extrinsic motivation of grades; however, the students do not value the task enough to value the reward. There is a disconnect between the motivation and the task.

Gender Schema Theory

Since male students far outnumber female students in remediated ELA classes at me school, it is important to consider the impact gender plays on student performance. Sandra Bem (1981) developed gender schema theory (GST) in an effort to explain how children learn to behave in ways that conform to societally accepted notions of male and female qualities. Society views women as "communal, kind, family-oriented, warm, and sociable, while casting men as "agentic, skilled, work-oriented, competent, and assertive" (Xu et al., 2019, p. 2). According to Bem (1983):

> Gender schema theory proposes that sex typing derives in large measure from gender-schematic processing, from a generalized readiness on the part of the child to encode and to organize information—including information about the self— according to the culture's definitions of maleness and femaleness. (p. 603)

Hence, children undergo sex typing as they learn what is deemed culturally appropriate for males and females and then they work to embody these qualities. This occurs through schematic processing which "enables the individual to impose structure and meaning onto the vast array of incoming stimuli" (Bem, 1981, p. 355). Children observe the world around them and begin to categorize information as either male or female (Bem, 1983). This differentiation is not only applied to human anatomy, but also to more abstract ideas,

like shapes and even the phases of the moon (Bem, 1981). Consequently, children learn to see themselves in terms of gender and will sometimes act according to what they perceive as appropriate or typical for males or females (Bem,1981).

Unfortunately, some subjects, like language-based courses, are viewed as being feminine (Vantieghem et al., 2014). Since these types of courses fall outside of what is considered masculine, some male students might purposefully underachieve in class. In fact, "the culture of masculinity has a profound impact on the way boys enact masculinity and 'do gender' in their everyday lives at school" (Vantieghem et al., 2014, p. 361). Boys tend to have more disruptive behavior, seek attention through joking, attend less to homework, and rely on talent instead of hard work (Vantieghem et al., 2014). GST helps to explain this behavior because a child "learns to evaluate his or her adequacy as a person in terms of the gender schema, to match his or her preferences, attitudes, behaviors, and personal attributes against the prototypes stored within it" (Bem, 1981, p. 355). As a result, male students behave in ways that conform to the ideas of what it means to be masculine.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the disengagement of male students in remediated ELA classrooms at me school through action research using a phenomenological approach. Male students are disproportionately represented in these classrooms. Gender bias in the classroom exists for both girls and boys (Gurian, 2011); however, the focus to promote gender equality in the classroom has generally been applied only to female students. The unequal distribution of male and female students in leveled ELA classes demonstrates that male students are falling behind their female

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counterparts in the development of literacy skills. As an ELA teacher, I felt compelled to identify perceptions of male students and their teachers to understand why this trend is occurring. I anticipated using the results of this study to reverse this trend at my school by looking at the way in which male students are engaged in the classroom and perceived by their teachers. The questions addressed in this research study are:

1. What are the experiences of male students in Level 2 ELA classes?

2. How are male students in the Level 2 ELA classrooms perceived by teachers?

I selected these questions because they allowed me to identify potential contributing factors to male disengagement in Level 2 ELA classes. These questions also helped me to discern the constructs that might be impeding male students from learning as well as the inequities that might exist in the school system itself. These questions also allowed me to research student and teacher perceptions in the learning environment and the possible biases that may exist.

Positionality

The idea of positionality demands that I ask the question, "Who am I in relation to my participants and my setting?" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 37). Considering positionality and clearly understanding my role in this study is important because it adds validity and trustworthiness to my findings (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Since I will be evaluating and reflecting on my own classroom, I was an insider in this study. Through practitioner inquiry, I reflected on my perceptions and identified areas where I might be underserving my male students. While it might be an advantage that I am familiar with my setting, this "tacit knowledge of a site" also lends itself to "bias, prejudice, and uninterrogated impressions and assumptions" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 44). I needed

to be aware of this inclination as I gathered and assessed data. Efron and Ravid (2013) established that triangulation and thick descriptions lend validity and trustworthiness to a research study. Following this protocol helped me to avoid this bias.

Although I see myself as an insider in this action research, my own personal experiences and the fact that I am a woman also make me an outsider in this process as well. Herr and Anderson (2015) asserted that "one's positionality doesn't fall out in neat categories and might even shift during the study" (p. 41). It was impossible for me to fully understand what my male students were experiencing. As a woman, I am inclined to structure my lessons in a gender-inflected ways that female students would prefer. Furthermore, my own educational experiences predispose me to a female friendly classroom. I attended an all-girls, private, Catholic high school in Philadelphia, which further establishes me as an outsider in this study. At times, I get easily frustrated by the silly behavior I see in my Level 2 boys. I find myself wondering why they have to use the bathroom every class period or why they need to get up to throw away trash in the middle of a lesson. Additionally, I do not always enjoy teaching Level 2 classes because there are so many behavioral issues. Again, I had not stopped to consider that perhaps my perceptions of these students were contributing to the issue. I know that my own biases may have impacted my study, but at least I have a growing awareness in this area.

While I certainly am impacted by my own educational experiences, my career background has made me keenly aware of gender biases. I became a high school English teacher as a career change. Previously, I worked in banking and finance, where I served as a bank manager and commercial lender. Twice a month all of the bank managers would convene at a formal meeting where we would discuss goals and banking issues. At

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one of these meetings, I vividly remember scanning the room and noticing that the male managers far outnumbered the female managers. I also remember feeling as if I did not have a voice in these meetings; my male colleagues would joke around and talk about sports, and I felt like I had nothing to contribute to the conversation. To make matters worse, all of my supervisors were males, and I did not feel comfortable sharing my thoughts with them because they frequently minimized my concerns. Working in banking was my first exposure to gender inequality, and it left a lasting impression on me. In order to survive, I learned to adapt to my environment, but I never learned to like it. My experiences in banking have given me a unique perspective in the classroom. I often view my students as customers, and I see my role as being someone who serves them. My only hope is that I have served them well.

My male students were the key stakeholders in this action research. Efron and Ravid (2013) stated that action research is an "inquiry conducted by educators in their own settings in order to advance their practice and improve their students' learning" (p. 2). My ultimate goal was to conduct this research to improve male achievement in my classroom. I also considered my colleagues to be potential stakeholders. Many of my colleagues have identified similar gender disparity patterns in their classrooms and also struggle to engage their male students. I am hopeful that my research can help to identify the causes of male disengagement in other classrooms, as well.

In order to conduct this study, I involved my students. I gathered data through the use of a survey, facilitated an interview with my students, and conducted classroom observations. I also conducted a focus group with my ELA colleagues. I have always approached teaching with the philosophy that all students can learn but they must want to

be in my classroom in order for that learning to take place. In other words, if a student hates my classroom, learning will not occur. My goal is to make the learning environment pleasant. I enter the classroom attempting to be kind and friendly at all times. I try to engage the students. I inject humor. However, it was not until I began to research this topic that I realized I might *not* be creating this environment. Perhaps I have created a classroom that does not provide male students with the tools they need to be successful.

Research Design

Since this problem centered on student engagement and teacher perceptions, the best method to collect data was through action research using a phenomenological approach. Additionally, since I approached this action research through the lens of practitioner inquiry, I needed to identify the perceptions of the stakeholders involved in this study. This means that I asked questions of male students and ELA teachers. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "To get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection" (p. 27). Thus, this information was gathered through a survey of students, a group interview with male students, classroom observations, and a focus group with teachers. Once I gathered this information, I then analyzed the results. Qualitative data "allows you to discover the significant connections and relationships among the parts in order to build a coherent interpretation and present logically structured findings" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 166). This required me to develop a system of coding and then to look for emerging categories to emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study took place in a public high school located in a rural community just outside of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The school is comprised of mostly White, middle-

class students who pride themselves for their country-like culture. The participants were selected based on a typical sampling because this sampling "reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97). Students were selected from my fifth period, 10th grade Level 2 class. I first surveyed all of the male students, including students with individualized education plans (IEPs) and 504 Service Agreements. I then asked five male students who do not have IEPs to participate in an interview to gather their perceptions of school and their attitudes toward learning. On the day of the interview, only four students were present because one student was in quarantine due to exposure to COVID-19. However, all five students, who are also enrolled in our vocational program, were the focus of my classroom observations. My colleagues who also teach ELA were asked to participate in a focus group. All nine agreed to participate; however, on the day of the focus group only eight teachers were able to attend.

The methods of data collection were a survey of students, an interview of selected students, two classroom observations, and a teacher focus group. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "For the most part, however, interviewing in qualitative investigations is more open-ended and less structured. Less-structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110). Observations are also a valuable research tool because they allow the researcher to observe behaviors in the specific context of the study. Observations combined with interviews and surveys help researchers to further understand behavior because we can ask the participant about specific behaviors (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Information

gathered through a focus group with teachers allowed me to gather information from my colleagues who are knowledgeable about the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Significance of the Study

This action research is important to the male students I teach and to teachers as it impacts our pedagogy. Data indicates the academic performance of male students is suffering in a number of areas, including lower report-card grades, higher special education referrals, and higher drop-out rates (Jackson & Hilliard, 2013). Research also indicates this low performance is due in part to gender bias (Gurian, 2011). Since a hallmark of action research is that it is meant to improve student learning within this specific setting (Efron & Ravid, 2013), my ultimate goal was to determine why male students were disengaged in ELA classrooms in hopes of increasing their achievement.

Conducting action research using a phenomenological approach is the best method to use to address this issue. Efron and Ravid (2013) stated that, "Action research is a distinct kind of research that is different from other traditional educational research. It is constructivist, situational, practical, systematic, and cyclical" (p. 7). As such, I aimed to construct new knowledge through inquiry to understand the phenomenon in my school system. This setting-specific research allowed me to explore my concerns in a methodical manner. In the end, I hoped to answer my research questions and apply the information I gained through the process.

Limitations of the Study

This study gathered qualitative data from students and teachers to assess student disengagement and teacher perceptions. One limitation was that I did not have parental input about student achievement or disengagement. While I considered gathering parent

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information, I ultimately eliminated this data point because I felt as though gathering this information would be problematic. Typically, parents of Level 2 students are hands-off. When we have Back to School Night at the beginning of the year, I have few parents of Level 2 students attend. While lack of parental involvement may contribute to male disengagement, I felt as though I could gather this information from the students I interviewed. Admittedly, I did not have a complete understanding of student home life.

This study was also limited by the location of the school and the community itself. My school is very rural and is known for being more of a country high school. Many Level 2 students come from White, middle-class families. I am doubtful that I truly ascertained the value the families place on education, nor did I have access to the educational levels of the adults in the home. I also was not able to gather the perceptions of students from diverse backgrounds, like African American students, or from students who were in the LGBTQ community because I did not have a representation from this demographic.

Another limitation was that I did not have access to middle school records. Typically, students begin to be tracked into Level 1 or Level 2 classes in sixth grade, which is considered middle school in my district. I asked my students about their educational history; however, many of them were unaware that they were even tracked in middle school. Having access to this information would have allowed me to understand when the disproportionate pattern of males in ELA classes began.

Lastly, while I was interested to get feedback from my colleagues about their perceptions of Level 2 students, I had concerns for two reasons. First, asking my colleagues to participate in focus groups held after school was difficult because many

people are eager to leave school as soon as possible. Second, I worried that teachers would hold back their true feelings in fear of being viewed as biased. No teacher wants to admit that they are treating groups of students differently, even if they are doing so inadvertently.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the problem with an overview of some of the literature. The theoretical frameworks are established as are the research questions and research design. Chapter 2 is a literature review. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used to gather and analyze the data. Chapter 4 is the presentation of the findings. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings and addresses potential next steps and implications.

Glossary of Terms

The acronym **ELA** stands for English Language Arts. In my school, ELA classes are tracked as either **Level 1** or **Level 2**. Level 1 classes are typically advanced, and Level 2 are remediated. My school uses the term **remediation** to describe classes where the students are in need of skill development. These classes typically move at a slower pace and have more scaffolded lessons to assist student learning. **IEP** is the acronym for Individualized Education Plan for students who receive special education services. A **504 Service Agreement** is a legal document that ensures students with disabilities receive the learning accommodations they need to be successful in the classroom.

Gender advantage is a term used in education reform that implies teaching strategies or practices that are advantageous to a specific gender. **Gender disadvantage**

then refers to educational practices that are unfair to a specific gender (Gurian, 2011).

Gender bias "implies a directed favoring of one group" (Gurian, 2011, p. 57).

A **schema** is "a cognitive structure, a network of associations that organizes and guides an individual's perceptions" (Bem, 1981, p. 355). **Gender schema theory (GST)** is a "social-cognitive theory about how people in society become gendered from an early age and the impact of this gendering on their cognitive and categorical processing throughout their lifetime" (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017, p. 567).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The goal of this chapter is to explore the literature that attempts to explain the disengagement of male students in ELA classes. As a result of this disengagement, some male students continue to underperform in comparison to female students in the ELA classroom, creating a gender gap in literacy skills that these boys need in order to be successful. In fact, this sociocultural trend is noted throughout the nation and has resulted in literature that is "replete with research studies conducted on the achievement of males" (Jackson & Hilliard, 2013, p. 311). This alarming trend is taking place in my own school and within my own classroom. Male students outnumber female students in remediated classes, and they demonstrate a lack of interest in the subject matter. This disengagement has long-term effects and severely limits male students after graduation. This trend also has significant long-term effects, such as fewer males graduating from college (Fortin et al., 2015, p. 549). Contributing factors to this lack of interest include biological differences, classroom teaching practices, and educational policies.

Many reasons contribute to the disproportionate number of male students to female students in remediated Level 2 ELA classes. A major reason why males differ from females is because their biological development and brain functioning differs considerably. The male brain develops slower than the female brain and hormonal differences predispose boys to be more aggressive and exhibit off-task behaviors (Gurian,

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2011). Because of the rate of change and development, the male and female brains develop on different timelines, and each is engineered to act in different ways because of the development of hormones. Males and females also prefer different types of literature to read; however, the ELA classroom is built on female preferences. The fictional reading material frequently used in the classroom appeals to female rather than male students (Marks, 2008; Taylor, 2004). By expanding our definitions of literacy and including other types of texts, like informational pieces, teachers could possibly engage male students (Taylor, 2004).

Finally, many educational practices tend to favor female students over male students. Twenty years ago, in an effort to close the gap between males and females in STEM courses, educational practices shifted to cater towards females (Gurian, 2011). For example, there is now a greater emphasis on co-operative learning, which females prefer, whereas boys prefer competition (Gurian, 2011). As a result, male students began to fall behind. All of these forces have converged to create a classroom environment that may alienate male students, resulting in decreased engagement and a lack of achievement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the issues noted that may be contributing to male disengagement in the ELA classrooms in my school. Currently, there is a disproportionate number of male students in remediated ELA classes, creating a gender gap in literacy skills that these students need in order to be successful in life. The high school classroom is the last chance we have to intervene and re-engage our boys in learning literacy skills. It is necessary for teaching practices in the ELA classroom to

adjust in order to address the needs of our male students and to re-engage them in class, as well as prepare them for life after high school.

Research Questions

The following questions guided my research:

1. What are the experiences of male students in Level 2 ELA classes?
2. How are male students in the Level 2 ELA classrooms perceived by teachers?

This chapter begins by reviewing the strategies I used to gather my data. I then present the theoretical framework through which I approached my topic. Next, I highlight the historical underpinnings of this issue and discuss the social justice issues that are a result of male underachievement. I also look at the biological factors and educational policies that contribute to male disengagement in the classroom. Finally, I discuss the findings on classroom engagement.

Literature Review Methodology

To better understand the problem of male disengagement in ELA classes, I began with searches through the University of South Carolina's library, specifically ERIC, EBSCOHost, and ProQuest. I found numerous articles and research studies that addressed the problem of male underachievement in the classroom. I also read several books on the topic by authors who have studied this problem for years. For each article, book, or study that I found valuable, I then utilized the reference lists to find additional research material. From these reference lists, I was able to compile a host of sources to assist in my understanding of the problem. As a result, I have articles, research studies, and numerous books on the topic of male disengagement and underachievement in the

classroom. I also found a few credible and valuable websites to reference that provided insightful information on the topic. Finally, I read all of the information and created an annotated bibliography of the most pertinent information, which proved to be a highly useful tool in approaching this literature review.

<div align="center">**Theoretical Framework**</div>

As I noted in Chapter 1, the theoretical frameworks that guided this research were motivation theory and GST. I discuss these frameworks and their applicability to my research in the following section.

Motivation Theory

Motivation theory helped guide my understanding and research into the disengagement of male students in remediated ELA classes in the West Shore School District. These students demonstrate a lack of interest in ELA classes and perform poorly as compared to their female counterparts. According to Gopalan et al. (2017), motivation is the "process to make a start, [that] guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviours" and it essentially "leads individuals to take action to achieve a goal or fulfill a need or expectation" (p. 1). When students lack desire to accomplish a goal, they do not perform in the classroom and quickly fall behind. It stands to reason that motivation directly correlates to student engagement with the material and contribution to class (Gopalan et al., 2017). Additionally, students with low self-efficacy who feel as though they will be unsuccessful at a task will not engage in completing the task (Irvine, 2018). Many of these students also lack intrinsic motivation and require some type of reward for completing the work; however, grades are not seen by students as valuable extrinsic

rewards. Often, the task requires more work than the perceived value of the task (Irvine, 2018). Ultimately, unmotivated students are likely to fall behind in the classroom.

GST

Bem's (1981) gender schema theory provides insight on the impact sex typing has on the behaviors of male and female children. Essentially, "boys and girls are expected to acquire sex-specific skills, they are also expected to have or acquire sex-specific self-concepts and personality attributes, to be masculine or feminine" (Bem, 1981, p. 354). Therefore, boys tend to act with more masculine traits, while girls emulate more typically feminine traits. Vantieghem et al. (2014) found that "boys asserted their masculinity through several practices, one of which was defying authority and goals of school" (p. 361). Additionally, boys are more likely to act aggressively, play the role of class-clown, and emphasize athletics over academics (Vantieghem et al., 2014). Masculine culture views studying and doing well in school as unpopular and the work of female students (Vantieghem et al., 2014). The masculine behaviors boys tend to exhibit in the classroom actually prevent them from being successful in certain subjects, like ELA (Vantieghem et al., 2014). Understanding that gender identity might contribute to the disengagement of male students helped me in understanding the causes of my problem of practice.

Historical Perspectives

Level 2 English classes at Red Land High School, which are remedial for students who demonstrate the need for greater skill development, are overwhelmingly comprised of boys. Unfortunately, this is a trend I have witnessed in my own classroom, as my remediated ELA classes are comprised mostly of boys. Something is taking place in the

school system that seems to alienate and disengage boys. This creates inequality for boys because they are not succeeding at the same rate as girls. While many factors might contribute to this, motivational theory and GST provided the best frameworks for this study based on my experiences in the classroom. By the time boys reach Level 2 ELA classes, they have already experienced declining motivation based on classroom practices and curriculum that is not engaging. Boys potentially find little value in the concepts taught and they might have a negative self-evaluation. Gender may also play a because people tend to view language-based classes as being more feminine.

Unfortunately, the disengagement of boys in ELA classes has a long history that extends beyond Red Land High School. This disengagement is the result of not only educational practices, but also social inequities. The dismal statistics on male achievement are alarming at best and have long-term implications, such as fewer male students graduating from college. In fact, "women now outnumber men among recent college graduates in most industrialized countries" (Fortin et al., 2015, p. 549). Kleinfeld (2009) found that changing educational policies in the early 1990s gave female students an advantage. For example, the 1994 Gender Equity in Education Act "identified girls as an underserved population and directed funding toward girls' needs" (Kleinfeld, 2009, p. 114). As a result, teaching practices shifted to serve girls' needs and learning style preferences. These educational shifts included an emphasis on co-operative learning and building the self-esteem of girls. Boys prefer competition and movement in the classroom (Gurian, 2011). They have more of a need to be active; however, feminine behaviors, like sitting quietly, are preferred in the classroom (Farrell & Gray, 2019). These new practices

treated boys more unfairly, not only causing social disparity, but also forcing boys to suppress their natural tendencies in the classroom.

The emphasis on female achievement has begun to close the gender gap in math and science for girls (Vantieghem et al., 2014), but this gap continues to grow in reading and writing skills to the detriment of boys. Kleinfeld (2009) asserted that "substantial gender gaps are occurring in reading and writing which place males at a serious disadvantage in the employment market and in college" (p. 119). Without these valuable skills, boys will not be as successful as girls. College graduation rates prove this to be true, as more girls graduate from college and seek advanced degrees (Fortin et al., 2015). The achievement of male students began to fall and no legislation was enacted to stop the decline. Sommers (2013) found that millions of dollars have been spent to help girls close the gender gap, yet "in the matter of basic literacy, where we have a real and alarming difference between boys and girls, initiatives to close the gap are nowhere to be found" (p. 157). While it is important to recognize the success of girls in the classroom through these efforts, boys are languishing and nothing is being done to reverse the trend.

Kleinfeld (2009) cited research that implicated feminist ideology as part of the reason boys fell behind. In the early 1990s, The American Association of University Women published a report that illuminated the gender gap between male and female students in the classroom. At that time, female students were far behind their male counterparts in math, science, and college entrance tests. As a result of this report, improving the status of girls became a priority in education, which impacted the curriculum and teaching strategies (Kleinfeld, 2009).

With education having a new emphasis on the advancement of girls, Kleinfeld (2009) noted that male test scores in reading and writing began to fall behind the scores of female students. Many people commonly believe that in other content areas, like math and science, male students may still earn higher scores, but even that gap is closing. In fact, a Department of Education report from 2000 called *Trends in High School Equity* gathered statistical evidence, like test scores, to assess the status of girls in education. The report showed surprising results. Instead of girls being short-changed by education, they "turned out to be far and away the superior students" (Sommers, 2013, p. 12). The change in policies was effectively working to close the gender gap for girls. Even though evidence was clearly demonstrating that boys were falling behind in reading and writing, nothing was enacted to reverse this trend. Sommers (2013) asserted "what is hard to understand is why the math and science gap launched a massive movement on behalf of girls, and yet a much larger gap in reading, writing and school engagement created no comparable effort for boys" (p. 16). Interestingly, Kleinfeld examined student grades by looking at high school transcripts and found similar results as Sommers: Girls earned higher grades in all subject areas, including math and science, counters assumptions that males excel in math and science. While it is positive that girls are thriving in the classroom, it is distressing that male students continue to fall behind.

In addition to grades and subject area preferences, Kleinfeld (2009) also found that boys are less likely to be prepared for school and they do not complete their homework as often as girls do. Boys are less engaged in school and participate less in extracurricular activities. Gurian (2011) found similar trends and noted that "girls, in general, study harder, get better grades, and are quieter in class; boys tend to goof off

more, get worse grades, and are louder" (pp. 58–59). The typical classroom environment rewards behaviors that are quiet and compliant. Boys need an interactive environment that moves from one topic to the next (Gurian, 2011). Furthermore, because boys are disengaged in the classroom, they are more likely to repeat a grade level, they represent 69% of students with learning disabilities, and they represent 76% of the school population with emotional disturbances (Kleinfeld, 2009, p. 122). Kleinfeld also found that males enrolled in fewer Advanced Placement courses and outnumbered female students in dropout rates. Sadly, among students aged 15–19, boys averaged 12.5 suicides per 100,000, as compared to girls at 2.8 (Kleinfeld, 2009, p. 124). Boys are also more likely to be referred to the office for behavior issues and conduct disorders, and they are more likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit disorders (Gurian, 2011; Kleinfeld, 2009). Ultimately, these statistics depict a bleak state of boys in America and asserts that nothing is being done to remedy this situation.

The long history of male students underperforming female students in reading achievement is also established by Brozo (2006). He stated that male students are far more likely to require reading remediation than female students. However, "inviting male students to find connections between their lives and school-based literacy may be the likely key to reducing achievement disparities between them and their female counterparts" (Brozo, 2006, p. 71). According to a data snapshot provided by the U.S. Department of Education (2012), there is a disparity in gender equity in the classroom. Girls now outnumber boys in AP courses and they are "equitably represented in rigorous high school math courses" (U.S. Department of Education, 2012, p.3). However, boys underperform girls in language-based courses. Boys are also more likely to be held back

a grade, and they represent more disciplinary referrals for bullying. In fact, boys represent 79.6% of the 92,000 sample of students disciplined for bullying behaviors (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Classroom practices have contributed to the decline in male achievement. Norman (2020) asserted that "With the additional mandates on schools, many classes do not allow for developmentally appropriate practices, such as play, but instead require students to sit for long periods of time and do more rigorous academics" (p. 50). These practices begin in kindergarten, which has shifted from a place of social learning to an environment of advanced learning. Since the male brain develops at a slower rate, boys are not developmentally ready to undertake reading in kindergarten (Sax, 2017). This emphasis on learning at such an early age creates frustrated male learners who begin to fall behind their female peers.

As boys continue in school, they are further limited by the content in literature courses. Literacy curricula should be built around the real-world passions and hobbies that male students enjoy in order to help them better engage with the material (Brozo, 2006). Teachers can accomplish this by giving students materials that relate to their real-world competencies. For example, if a male student likes a certain type of music and he is familiar with the genre, the teacher might engage the student by having him write his own lyrics. Teachers can build their classes around the interests and passions of the students. Therefore, if a student is an avid hockey player, the teacher might consider finding books about hockey. When the teacher builds the curriculum around the interests of the students, relationships between the teacher and students develop and grow (Brozo, 2006). In fact, Brozo (2006) found that teachers who build caring relationships with their

students and serve as mentors are able to help male students perform better in the classroom.

Farrell and Gray (2019) also provided bleak statistics which show that, by the end of eighth grade, only 20% of male students are proficient in writing and only 39% of male students are projected to graduate from college. The authors stated that this low graduation rate means that males are more likely to be unemployed, which can eventually result in problems with U.S. global leadership. In addition, the authors also found that boys who demonstrated more female-like behaviors in the classroom earned grades similar to those of girls; therefore, feminine behaviors may be preferred in the classroom because female students tend not to create problems in the classroom.

In addition, Farrell and Gray (2019) presented disturbing information about the mental health of boys. First, twice as many boys as girls are diagnosed with ADHD. The authors explained this diagnosis, in part, because young brains become addicted to the dopamine released when they engage in stimulating activities, like playing video games. This stimulation results in boys who have difficulty concentrating because school does not trigger this same stimulation, so these boys are bored easily. The authors stated that "as their brains adapt to this increased stimulation, they disconnect further and further from their natural internal motivation to cooperate and please their parents and teachers" (Farrell & Gray, 2019, p.316). Physical activity at school can help to offset this lack of focus; however, teachers in the modern classroom use strategies that cater more toward feminine qualities, such as sitting still. Also, boys are four times more likely to die by suicide than girls, and boys are twice as likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities

(Farrell & Gray, 2019, pp. 314–315). Hence, boys demonstrate an increase in mental health issues.

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy (2006) used data gathered from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a test given to all students throughout the nation, to analyze student achievement in ELA, math, and science. Like much of the information already shared, the Rennie Center (2006) provided stark and distressing facts about the state of boys. This study indicated that, in past years, much attention was given to the achievement of girls in the classroom, but now boys are suffering. In fact, "a growing body of evidence suggests that the pendulum may be swinging in the other direction—that the practices of contemporary American schools may favor females at the expense of their male peers" (Rennie Center, 2006, p. 1). In ELA, math, and science achievement, the Rennie Center (2006) found that girls outperform boys on ELA tests at a "substantially higher rate" (p. 4), and surprisingly, boys no longer show any substantial advantage in math and science. The Rennie Center also found that dropout rates are higher for boys than girls and that two-thirds of special education placements are boys. The study ended by recommending strategies to help close the gender gap for boys. The Rennie Center suggested experimenting with single-sex schools and providing gender difference training to teachers.

Research compiled by Jackson and Hilliard (2013) also demonstrates that boys dropout more frequently from high school than girls. In fact, they often have lower grades and lower standardized test scores. Also, they have lower college attendance and graduation rates. This poor performance and lack of a college education means that many males are entering the work force seeking manufacturing jobs that only require a basic

high school education (Farrell & Gray, 2019). However, many of these jobs are being eliminated, which places males at an economic disadvantage. State testing also shows that girls have almost leveled the gender gap in math and science, but the reading and writing gap between girls and boys continues to grow, placing boys at a great disadvantage. Many boys who fall behind "conclude that school is for girls" (Whitmire & Bailey, 2010, p. 57). Gender stereotypes might contribute to this problem because boys and girls often behave in ways that are societally and stereotypically expected by their gender. In fact, "Gender identity influences how people perceive the world around them and how they behave" (Vantieghem et al., 2014, p. 364). Students act according to the gender stereotype; however, academic achievement should not be viewed along gender lines. In order for boys to succeed, teachers need to set high standards for everyone.

Biological Differences

Males and females are biologically different and develop according to different timelines (Sax, 2017). Personal observations from working around teenagers on a daily basis is enough to prove that boys and girls often think differently, behave differently, and express emotions very differently. It is all too common to comfort crying teenage girls or to convince angry teenage boys not to fight other angry teenage boys. If biological make-up impacts all aspects of life, it stands to reason, then, that these biological differences impact learning, as well.

Gurian (2011) asserted that the brain itself functions differently in boys and girls. For example, "Girls' verbal abilities tend to develop earlier so they rely more heavily on verbal communication; boys often rely heavily on nonverbal communication, and are less

able to verbalize feelings and responses as quickly as girls" (Gurian, 2011, p. 26). Consequently, boys enter the classroom already at a disadvantage, especially in reading and writing. Language-based courses may be more difficult for boys.

To make matters worse, greater demands have been placed on our students at much earlier ages, even though boys are not developmentally ready for these demands. As mentioned earlier, according to Sax (2017), kindergarten is no longer a place for play and creativity, but rather there has been quite an emphasis on the teaching of reading and writing. Since boys develop more slowly, they are not ready to read yet, which creates boys who do not like to read at all. Sax used the analogy of teaching a seven-year-old child to drive. The child is not developmentally ready and the results could be disastrous. The maturation process also puts boys developmentally behind girls in reading, so they are sometimes turned-off to reading at an early age (Sax, 2017).

Norman (2020) also stated that the male brain is biologically different from the female brain. Female brains develop earlier, and they are able to master fine motor skills earlier, which means that they have an easier time writing. Since boys take longer to develop this skill, they may become frustrated if asked to perform these tasks before they are developmentally ready. Furthermore, Norman stated that girls also have better hearing of soft sounds, which allows them to pay closer attention. This biological advantage in girls may make boys seem inattentive, which could lead to teacher misconceptions of male behaviors in the classroom.

Sax (2017), like Gurian (2011), also asserted that female brains develop faster, which often results in boys seeming more immature. Sax (2017) further stated that

biological differences mean that a "boy will appear less mature, less self-controlled, less able to concentrate and focus for sustained periods of time, compared to a girl" (p. 87). Norman (2020) reiterated this idea when asserting that girls are also able to sit longer than boys, which makes them seem more compliant with classroom rules which is a more desirable classroom behavior. These biological differences mean that males tend to be more aggressive, prefer a more physical and competitive environment, engage in more risk taking, and develop language-based skills at a slower rate. According to Gurian, brain differences in males also result in behavioral problems and disruptions to teaching. Often, these overactive boys are misdiagnosed as having ADHD and are medicated for behaviors that are simply part of the maturation process (Sax, 2017). As a result, boys require more attention and are often viewed as behavioral problems. Frequently, students with perceived behavioral problems are tracked in remediated ELA courses, which are slower paced to allow for concentrated skill development. Once a student is perceived as a problem, it is very difficult to move him out of remediated classes. Later in life, surging testosterone in the teenage male brain leads to greater aggression and impulsive behavior, which increases student distraction (Gurian, 2011). Research in the area of brain development also indicates males are predisposed to learn and behave in distinctive ways. Gurian applied this brain-based data to the classroom when he looked at the advantages and disadvantages boys have in school. For example, he found that boys would actually benefit from single-sex education. He also suggested to "allow movement in the classroom, especially for those students who think better when they're moving around" (Gurian, 2011, p. 314). However, the typical classroom is not built around this movement, but rather on compliance and co-operative learning.

Jackson and Hilliard (2013) explored three areas that contribute to the issue of male under-achievement: physiological differences, sociological differences, and cognition differences. The authors contended that physiologically, the male brain is different from the female brain. They suggested that "weak underlying cognitive skills – concentration, perception, memory and logical thinking – account for the majority of learning difficulties, especially among boys" (Jackson & Hilliard, 2013, p. 312). Therefore, when these cognitive skills are weak, male students experience learning struggles. Male students need information that is relevant and presented both verbally and nonverbally.

Educational Policies

Many educational policies shifted to close the gender gap for girls, but this only exacerbated problems in reading and writing for boys. The classroom now favors content and teaching styles that girls prefer (Gurian, 2011). In the West Shore School District, nearly all of the mandated ELA curriculum ELA is fictional in nature, which is not what most male students prefer to read. As a result, they disengage when in the classroom. Norman (2020) indicated the same idea and noted that the reading material offered favors girls, who prefer stories with plot lines they can talk about. Boys, on the other hand, tend to prefer sports books, comics, spy novels, and science fiction. Often, these genres are not read as part of the curriculum. Finally, Norman noted another problem, which is that boys are more likely to have female teachers, which might indicate to boys that reading is a feminine activity. Norman suggested that teachers engage boys by offering them a variety of reading materials that appeal to their interests.

The disproportionate number of female teachers in education may also contribute to male student disengagement and female student success. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), 76% of public school teachers were female, creating a gender disparity in the classroom. Unfortunately, the number of male teachers in the secondary classroom continues to drop (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Research results on the effectiveness of female teachers when teaching male students versus male teachers teaching male students provided somewhat mixed results. According to Dee (2007), students who were assigned to classrooms where they were taught by teachers of the same gender demonstrated significant achievement as compared to lower achievement in opposite-gender teacher classrooms. The data indicated that the "gender interactions between teachers and students have statistically significant effects on a diverse set of educational outcomes: test scores, teacher perceptions of student performance and student engagement with academic subjects" (Dee, 2007, p. 549). Spilt et al. (2012), on the other hand, noted that female teachers in general develop much more positive relationships with all of their students, males and females. However, this information stands to reason because female teachers far outnumber male teachers in public education. Therefore, the possibility that male students might benefit from male teachers and improve their students' achievement levels remains a potential strategy in helping male students to close the literacy gap.

Sommers (2013) provided both quantitative and qualitative data to show that policies aimed toward improving the status of female students have actively harmed the productivity and well-being of male students. As referenced earlier, a Department of Education report had surprising results, and one of the study's authors actually stated,

"We did not realize women were doing so well" (as cited in Sommers, 2013, p. 12). In part, the study found that girls have higher GPAs, are more prepared for school, outperform males in reading and writing, are more likely to graduate from college, and are more likely to earn advanced degrees (Sommers, 2013, p. 13). Furthermore, Sommers (2013) reported that from an early age boys' behaviors in the schoolyard are redirected by teachers over 48% of the time, indicating "educators regard the normal play of little boys with disapproval" (p. 42). As boys mature, this same trend continues with 32% of boys in grades 9–12 being suspended as opposed to 17% of girls (Sommers, 2013, p. 47). Additionally, boys tend to be disengaged in language arts classes because they prefer relevant work that emphasizes competition, with less collaborative work, and less whole-class instruction (Sommers, 2013, p. 159).

Watson et al. (2010) asserted that "female students consistently score higher than boys on average in both reading and writing" (p. 356). They presented the findings of multiple studies that looked at the social, cultural, and institutional factors that contributed to the decline in male performance. Additionally, Marks (2008) stated that, in the United States, "lower aspirations (either educational or occupational) are more likely to be associated with the weaker performance of boys rather than girls" (p. 92). Ultimately, Marks (2008) asserted:

These results probably reflect the success of policies in individual countries promoting the educational outcomes of girls. In contrast to the situation in the past, nowadays the gender differences in the distribution of boys and girls across school systems contribute to the larger gender gaps favouring girls in reading in most countries. (p. 106)

Taylor (2004) focused on the shift in educational policies from male students to female students. This shift resulted in different teaching styles that alienated boys. Taylor (2004) stated, "in our zeal to close the gender gap for girls, we may have overlooked the wide gender gap that exists for boys in the area of literacy" (p. 290). National test scores show that girls continually outperform boys on reading tests. Although the test scores appear bleak, Taylor believes there are strategies teachers could undertake to close this gap and this begins by broadening what it means to be literate. Boys prefer different types of literature that are not always taught as part of the curriculum in the classroom. According to the research Taylor (2004) presented, boys "prefer magazines that are analytical and contain facts more than narrative" (p. 292). Boys also prefer to have a choice in what they read, especially when they have a strong interest in the subject area. Generally, boys prefer informative reading that involves computer literacy. Male students also prefer hands-on learning, and they prefer to feel in control. Taylor suggested using book clubs, relevant material decided by choice, and scaffolding of emotional readings as ways to engage boys.

Motivation and Classroom Engagement

While biological factors and educational policy changes impact boys' performance, understanding motivation is also critically important to engaging and improving ELA achievement among male students, especially for those tracked in remedial courses. In this next section, I will further analyze the problem of male disengagement in the classroom and focus specifically on the area of classroom engagement issues, which is a disadvantage for boys.

The demographic in the ELA classroom has been shifting at Red Land High School over the past few years. Girls outnumber boys in college preparatory English, and most alarmingly, boys outnumber girls in all remediated ELA classes. Yet, my school has done nothing to reverse this trend. Remediated classes are more difficult to manage because there are many off-task behaviors. Students are more apt to complain about work or simply not do the work at all. Boys in these classes are disengaged with the material, and they are falling behind.

After synthesizing the data from the "Monitoring the Future" (MTF) surveys conducted by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, Fortin et al. (2015), researchers found several interesting trends to explain why female students outnumber male students in academic achievement and as college graduates. The MTF study was originally conducted in an effort to chart substance abuse by students in grades 8–12. Fortin et al. evaluated the responses to the surveys through a new lens of gender disparity. First, male students tend to be overconfident in their self-assessment of their performance. Essentially, they perform lower, but assess themselves higher. While boys may seem overconfident, interestingly they set lower expectations for themselves. Since boys frequently set low expectations for themselves (Fortin et al., 2015), teachers interpret this as a lack of motivation. Second, boys have lower expectations of attending college and graduate school and take fewer academically challenging classes. This disadvantages them in the workforce since they will not graduate with an education beyond high school. Also, boys are more likely to engage in risky behaviors. The major finding, however, was that "More girls than boys are aiming for professions that require a graduate degree, more girls are getting As. More boys than girls are aiming for skilled

worker jobs and protective service occupations, more boys are getting C+s" (Fortin et al., 2015, pp. 575–576). Also, girls tend to set higher educational expectations for themselves, whereas boys prefer more vocational careers. This phenomenon is evident in ELA classes in the West Shore School District as well. Most of the boys in remediated classes are also in the vocational program and show no desire to attend college. While college is not for every student, the waning literacy skills are nevertheless a concern.

Jackson and Hilliard (2013) studied the factors that contribute to the failure of boys in the classroom. Through a survey of data that exists on this topic, they were able to compile quantitative data that established the idea that boys are failing in school. Overwhelmingly, when compared to girls, more boys receive lower grades; exhibit hyperactive behavior; qualify for special education services; receive harsher punishments, such as suspensions; engage in risky behaviors; and, sadly, are more likely to die by suicide. These disciplinary actions stigmatize boys, and they become labeled as troubled. Furthermore, boys attempt to assert masculinity in the classroom because of their perceptions of what U.S. culture prefers. Therefore, "our boys perform to avoid labels such as sissy, gay or homosexual" (Jackson & Hilliard, 2013, p. 313). Since many boys are afraid of these labels, they are less motivated to learn. Often, this means that boys behave in ways that result in punishment and create a negative academic impression of boys. Teachers spend more time correcting boys and less time instructing them. Furthermore, the authors found that, cognitively, boys are two to three times more likely to have reading disabilities (Jackson & Hilliard, 2013, p. 312). This higher number is attributed to teacher preparation programs that are weak in teaching literacy skills and a lack of access to resources for elementary-aged boys.

Contributing to a lack of motivation is the idea that many boys do not see themselves as readers (Bozack, 2011). In this study, Bozack (2011) used a Motivations for Reading Questionnaire to gather information from 330 boys attending an all-male Catholic high school. The students completed the 83 questions pertaining to their motivation and beliefs about reading and writing during class. If boys do not see themselves as readers, they become disengaged in class. This negative self-image may contribute to a lack of motivation and requires positive feedback from the teacher. Instead, many teachers may misinterpret this low self-image as apathy. Interestingly, the researcher found that some male students reported that they had positive beliefs about reading and writing and saw themselves as readers and writers; however, teachers do not routinely acknowledge this attitude verbally to help strengthen student perceptions. Furthermore, teachers often form beliefs about students that might not be accurate. For instance, if a student did the assignment, he was considered a good reader. If he struggled, the teacher believed he should just work harder. Bozack found that reading motivation in boys positively correlated to reading achievement on tests but noted no significant correlation to student self-beliefs and teacher beliefs about the student. It was shown that "Students perceived teachers as having beliefs similar to their own about their individual reading ability but no actual relationship was found" (Bozack, 2011, p. 69). The researcher suggested that greater teacher professional development might be necessary to address adolescent literacy and equality issues. Bozack (2011) stated teachers need to "elicit input from the boys about ways academic reading could be enhanced at the school" (p. 71). Understanding male beliefs and motivation in reading and writing is essential if schools are to close the gender gap in literacy (Bozack, 2011).

Furthermore, boys exhibit different behaviors than girls, which results in social stigmas associated with what it means to be a boy. Watson et al. (2010) conducted a survey and determined that there is an "understanding of what is acceptable masculine behavior," and this idea "must be challenged and deconstructed if we are to improve boys' achievement" (p. 357). Once again, boys are living up to their gender stereotype instead of their potential. Next, the authors addressed the idea that culture seems to dictate that being adept at reading and writing are more feminine traits. Boys who are skillful in reading and writing challenge the mainstream notion of masculinity and may be seen by their peers as nerds. Once again, they act in ways to avoid this label, like acting out. Finally, the authors suggested recruiting more male teachers and creating a more diversified teaching staff, adding:

> By making gender issues an integral part of the curriculum, we may generate opportunities to interrogate essentialist understandings of what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl and create learning environments in which boys and girls are free to engage and therefore improve their literacy skills without fear of social and cultural repercussions. (Watson et al., 2010, p. 560)

Therefore, all genders have the chance to improve if educators pay attention to these areas.

After conducting extensive research looking at the influence of gender on male and female development, Sax (2017) presented the idea that boys and girls approach education differently. First, they both interact with teachers in different ways. Girls prefer to create a friendly relationship with teachers, while boys find such interactions nerdy.

Girls want teachers to think highly of them, so they are more inclined to complete their homework. Boys complete homework only if they find it interesting and relevant. Second, boys and girls hear teacher voices differently. Students perceive messages from teachers of the opposite gender in a mismatched manner. For instance, boys need female teachers to speak with raised voices to get their attention. Behaviors between boys and girls in the classroom also differ. In the classroom, girls are more likely to ask questions than boys because boys are afraid of being perceived as geeks; therefore, boys sometimes like to cause disruptions in the classroom to "raise their status in the eyes of other boys" (Sax, 2017, p. 82). For this reason, boys do not work well in small groups because there are many off-task behaviors. Additionally, according to Sax, boys perceive direct eye-to-eye contact with a person who is not a friend as hostile. Therefore, teachers should avoid looking directly at a male student when working one-on-one. Rather, it is suggested that the teacher sit side-by-side with the boy so they can look at the work together.

In a survey, Norman (2020) found that girls not only read more than boys, but they also demonstrate more self-control in the classroom. Additionally, Norman stated that schools have changed to allow for less play time and more sit time. This creates disadvantages for boys and advantages for girls who can sit for longer periods of time. Norman further presented data that demonstrated the growing disparity between male and female students in reading achievement. While the study focused on state tests from Michigan, Norman asserted that these same trends are found in states across the country and recommended inviting male readers into the classroom as mentors to show boys that reading is also a male activity. Finally, giving boys choices within the classroom, such as the opportunity to sit or stand or taking them outside to read, can also help increase

engagement. Since the boys frequently reported that they were bored in class, educators must tap into the interests of the students by understanding their lives beyond the classroom. This means that teachers can mitigate disengagement by knowing their students and understanding their lives outside of school.

Sarroub and Pernicek (2016) conducted a case study of high school boys using ethnographic interviews, observations, and artifacts collected from school to examine how high school literacy teachers can help their male students engage with the material. They reported, in 2004, boys scored 16 points lower than girls in standardized testing (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). They contended that boys are underachieving and disengaged in reading. They stated that boys do not see the connection between what they are reading in school and what they are doing in the real world. This disconnect leads to less motivation and disengagement. Ultimately, the researchers found that teachers must treat each student individually, realizing that everyone is complex in his approach to learning. Boys also prefer to use technology when learning, so these options should be made available to the students.

Boys struggle in the classroom from kindergarten through high school and beyond. After conducting extensive research in the area of gender equality, Sadker et al. (2009) discussed many of the issues that boys face in high school. For instance, much like girls, they are obsessed with their physical appearance. Many boys take steroids to obtain the body they desire, but steroids also cause aggression, which "can lead to violence in the form of a testosterone-driven rage" (Sadker et al., 2009, p. 147). Sadker et al. also reported that teachers often discussed the need to continually discipline boys. The authors attribute this to the idea that, "Society teaches boys to project an outward

appearance of strength, confidence, and security even when all are lacking" (Sadker et al., 2009, p. 153). Sadker et al. (2009) stated that "Boys are more likely to get into trouble, more likely not to do their assignments well or on time or at all, and not surprisingly, earn lower school grades" (p. 176). However, these same boys do better than girls on high stakes testing. The authors attributed this to the idea that tests may actually favor one gender over another. Boys perform better on multiple choice tests, timed tests, and content-driven questions. Girls do better on open-ended, writing based tests. Sadker et al., (2009) also asserted that teachers tend to prefer girls and, specifically, "English teachers explain that students receive good grades through hard work, good attendance, handing in assignments on time, classroom tests, quality materials prepared outside of class, positive attitudes, and performing to prescribed style, including good handwriting" (p. 195). The authors asserted that the greatest gap exists not just between boys and girls, but between minoritized boys and poor boys and the rest of the school population. They emphasized that girls outperform boys in the classroom in reading and writing.

Marks (2008) analyzed data gathered from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2000 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) project. The PISA exam charted the achievement of over 175,000, 15-year-old students in over 6,000 schools. Marks (2008) found that the reading gap between girls and boys increased internationally over time to clearly favor girls and reflects the fact that "Policies designed to improve girls' educational outcomes are likely to reduce the gender gap in mathematics but increase the gender gap in reading" (p. 106). The author attributed this outcome to changes in testing materials because girls are able to interpret

more difficult texts. Marks also found that when students attended more academically rigorous schools, where these students had academically oriented occupations, scores were higher. However, boys tended to have lower academic and occupational goals, which contributed to their lower achievement.

In their study, Johnson and Gooliaff (2013) observed nine students in the third grade from various areas and conducted a qualitative study by surveying the boys both before and after an intervention to determine the level of enjoyment they experienced when writing, using technology, and reading comic books. Specifically, the researchers looked at the engagement of young boys in writing when using a hands-on, digital method. They investigated if using technology, specifically Comic Life and Photo Story, had the ability to increase boys' self-confidence and engagement when writing. As a result, they asserted that "current classroom practices disadvantage boys and contribute to higher school drop-out rates, lack of completion of college degrees, and anti-social behavior" (Johnson & Gooliaff, 2013, p. 28). In fact, many of the expectations in the classroom seem more geared toward female students, like being quiet and sitting still. As a result of their study, the researchers suggested that boys prefer a classroom that involves motor activity, produces products, allows for competition, and uses humor between the teacher and the student.

Summary

Boys are disengaged in ELA classes, and they continue to fall behind their female peers. In an effort to close the gender achievement gap for girls, boys were inadvertently left behind. While girls were able to close the gap in STEM courses, the male

achievement gap in reading and writing continued to grow for a number of reasons. First, the male brain develops at a different pace than the female brain; however, students are being taught to read at a very early age. This early approach to teaching reading and writing disadvantages boys who are not developmentally ready to learn. Boys also often exhibit behaviors that conflict with teachers' preferences. Further, the material taught in the ELA classroom frequently caters to a female audience rather than a male audience. Boys prefer more non-fiction and enjoy competition, but this is not always offered in the classroom. Ultimately, the classroom is geared more toward girls, and boys are disengaged.

I have noted this very trend in my own classroom and in my school. Using the theoretical frameworks of motivation theory and GST and the action research design I will describe in Chapter 3, I studied my own teaching, and I questioned my male students to better understand their feelings in the classroom. Additionally, I gathered information from my colleagues about their perceptions and teaching practices to better understand why male students are disengaged. Furthermore, I looked at strategies to encourage engagement in the classroom. My goal was to make suggestions to implement change and engage male students in the ELA classroom.

CHAPTER 3

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the disengagement of male students in remediated Level 2 ELA classes through action research using a phenomenological approach. Males are disproportionately represented in Level 2 ELA classes, which indicates that there is some phenomenon in the school system and their experiences in ELA classes that might be inadvertently favoring female students while disadvantaging male students.

The uneven distribution of male students in Level 2 ELA classes contributes to a growing gender achievement gap. There are several factors that potentially contribute to this problem. Male students might be experiencing gender bias in the classroom, which prevents them from developing the skills they need to be successful. In fact, female students graduating from college now outnumber male students (Fortin et al., 2015, p. 549). This gap positions male students to enter the work force with less earning potential. In the 1990s, educational practices shifted to focus on the learning needs of female students (Gurian, 2011). Unfortunately, this resulted in less emphasis on male students and their learning preferences. For example, ELA classes predominantly employ fiction as the primary means for instruction, which caters toward female students. Male students tend to prefer nonfiction (Marks, 2008; Taylor, 2004). Since classroom teaching practices typically focus on the learning preferences of female students, male students may become disengaged. Motivation theory helps to explain the characteristics of motivated students

and provides strategies for teachers to increase motivation in the ELA classroom. Reading instruction must attend to the learning styles and preferences of all students in order to increase engagement (Tracey & Morrow, 2011, p. 76). Therefore, if the classroom is structured around the learning preferences of females, male students will inevitably disengage with the material and fall behind in their skill development.

Next, teacher perceptions of male students may also contribute to this disparity of male students in Level 2 ELA classes. Research in the area of brain development indicates that male students tend to be more distracted and impulsive (Gurian, 2011). These off-task behaviors make it more difficult to teach Level 2 male students, which impacts teacher perceptions of these students. Teachers sometimes complain about the difficulty they experience when managing behaviors in the classroom. Students perceived as behavioral issues are usually tracked in remediated classes. In fact, male students typically have lower grades, higher special education referrals, and increased dropout rates (Jackson & Hilliard, 2013). Additionally, many male students do not see themselves as readers, creating a lower self-esteem and decreased motivation. These students also believe that their teachers share this same opinion of them (Bozack, 2011). Often, this inherent assumption is correct. Evaluating teacher perceptions of Level 2 male students is essential to helping engage these students and increase their success rate. Additionally, based on GST, some male students might perceive language-based courses and studying as being more feminine activities and resist performing in class because these actions are in opposition to stereotypical masculine identities (Bem, 1981; Vantieghem et al., 2014).

Research Design and Research Questions

Since I was attempting to understand a phenomenon that I have noticed in my school system, this qualitative study was designed as action research using a phenomenological approach. I attempted to understand the experiences of male students in remediated ELA classes which might lead to their disengagement. Qualitative researchers "are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Thus, this study gathered data that was qualitative in nature. Additionally, this study represented action research because it is "inquiry conducted by educators in their own setting in order to advance their practice and to improve their students' learning" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 2).

Inquiry as stance is a theory that lent itself nicely for me to study this phenomenon. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) presented the idea of inquiry as stance, which essentially asserts that teachers gather data and interpret these findings frequently. Inquiry as stance is a "grounded theory of action that positions the role of practitioners and practitioner knowledge as central to the goal of transforming teaching, learning, leading, and schooling" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 119). Therefore, insiders like me are in the best position to study our practices and initiate reform. By evaluating the constructs that might be contributing to this problem, I suggest changes in the way my school educates male students.

Since this problem is taking place in other ELA classes, I used a phenomenological approach to learn my colleagues' perceptions as they related to male students in Level 2 classes. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that "the philosophy of

phenomenology comes from a focus on the experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness" (p. 26). Inquiry as stance helped to frame my action research and gather this information. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009):

> Working from and with an inquiry stance, then, involves the continual process of making current arrangements problematic; questioning the ways knowledge and practice are constructed, evaluated, and used; and assuming that part of the work of practitioners individually and collectively is to participate in educational and social change. (p. 121)

Gathering data from my colleagues and questioning their perceptions allowed me to study the problem and suggest changes that could disrupt this system. Key to inquiry as stance is a focus on transforming educational practices.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) described inquiry as stance as having four basic dimensions: (1) a focus on local and global knowledge; (2) the transformative nature and connectedness of teaching and learning; (3) the ability of practitioner inquiry communities to initiate change; and (4) an all-encompassing emphasis on social justice and a more democratic education. These dimensions guided my research and were applied to the problem I have identified. First, the focus on local and global knowledge highlights the idea that practitioners are "knowers" who can wield "the transformative power of local knowledge in justice-related efforts to improve students' learning and enhance their life chances" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 127). Inquiry as stance values the knowledge practitioners uncover during the study, local knowledge, while also recognizing that practitioners experience global influences. Local knowledge gleaned

from practitioner inquiry allows us to make connections to greater social and cultural issues. Studying teacher perceptions of Level 2 students helped me to see if there were larger inequities or biases at work.

The second dimension of inquiry as stance values the interconnectedness of teaching and learning. Inquiry communities "support practitioners—individually and collectively—in engaging their day-to-day work as much more than routine performance and in seeking opportunities for leadership and activism within and beyond their immediate sites of practice" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 141). Identifying the contributing forces to male disengagement in my school system has implications beyond my classroom. This idea is again emphasized by the last two dimensions of inquiry as stance in that the goal of my study was to initiate change to create a more socially responsible and just atmosphere for male students.

My action research was meant to investigate male disengagement within my own school system. Approaching action research through a phenomenological design allowed me to study the experiences of the stakeholders involved: male students and teachers. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "The task of the phenomenologist, then, is to depict the essence or basic structure of experience" (p. 26). I accomplished this through survey responses from students, a group interview with male students, classroom observations of students, and a teacher focus group. I then analyzed the data collected to identify themes. This research design, consequently, aligned with my theoretical frameworks of motivation theory and GST because I studied the experiences of male students and the perceptions of their teachers.

As a result, this research study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of male students in Level 2 ELA classes?

2. How are male students in the Level 2 ELA classrooms perceived by teachers?

These research questions allowed me to collect qualitative data while conducting action research through a phenomenological approach. Since phenomenology focuses on the people's experiences, I gathered information from male students and ELA teachers about their experiences and analyzed the data to identify themes that emerged.

Research Setting, Sampling Plan, and Participants

This research study took place at Red Land High School, a suburban high school in the West Shore School district located in South Central Pennsylvania. The school is predominantly comprised of White, middle-class students. There were two sets of participants in this study: 10th grade, male students and ELA teachers. Data was collected from my 10th grade, Level 2 ELA male students using a typical sampling "because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97). The class selected for this study is comprised of 19 students: 16 males and 3 females. Additionally, the class selected was a co-taught class with a special education teacher because 13 of the students require special education services. Of the 16 boys, I requested participation in the interview from 5 regular education students. These boys represented the typical Level 2 ELA student who is generally loud, somewhat disruptive in class, and disengaged as evidenced by a low grade. My sample did not consist of any student with an IEP, since this would impact my data. Level 2 classes are, in fact, the ideal learning environment for students who need skill development. To determine the reasons why male students are disengaged, I needed a sampling of students who were not predisposed to needing additional help, but rather who were disengaged in

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the classroom and showed a lack of motivation. However, I did gather data from all students from the survey to determine if there was a common theme pertaining to their perceptions of education.

When I asked the five regular education students to participate in the interview, I expected to have negative responses and then needing to convince them to work with me. However, I was completely wrong. The five students I asked eagerly accepted the invitation to participate in the study. They were actually excited and frequently asked me when the interview was going to take place. They were also very excited to select their pseudonyms. Interviewing these students was delightful.

I selected teacher participants using a convenience sampling because this sample is based on "time, money, location, availability of sites or respondents, and so on" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98). Since all teachers at Red Land High School have taught Level 2 classes at some point, I invited all teachers to participate in the focus group. There are nine ELA teachers not including me. Eight of the teachers participated; one teacher was on quarantine for COVID-19. My colleagues have a great deal of experience. They have been teaching in the West Shore School District anywhere from 15 to 29 years. Of the eight teachers, five were women and three were men. Also, five of the teachers hold advanced degrees.

Data Collection Methods

There were several qualitative data collection methods in this research study. These methods included a survey, a group interview, two classroom observations, and a teacher focus group. While the survey provided quantitative data, the information

gathered was used to provide support for the qualitative themes identified through the interview, observations, and focus group responses.

This study began with a survey given to my students which provided me with valuable information about their perceptions of themselves and those they encountered. I created the survey in Google and then shared it with my students on their learning platform, Schoology. At the beginning of second marking period, I began class by explaining the nature of my research and asking for their participation in the survey. I expected there to be complaints and negative remarks, but instead, I students asked many questions about my research. All students took the survey, and they did not rush through the questions. It took about 10–15 minutes for students to respond to the survey. There were 18 statements to which the students responded with either *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree*. Table 3.1 lists the statements.

Table 3.1 Google Survey Statements

I take pride in my schoolwork.
My teachers are willing to help me succeed.
I submit my schoolwork on-time.
My teachers treat all students, males and females, the same.
My parents monitor my grades.
I am on my phone or computer in class instead of doing my classwork.
I find it difficult to stay in my seat for an entire class period.
I am interested in the things we learn in class.
I can see how my classes are preparing me for the real world.
My male classmates behave the way my teacher wants them to.

My female classmates behave the way my teacher wants them to.
Earning good grades is more of an expectation for girls than for boys.
I plan on continuing my education after high school.
I complete my classwork and my homework even if I do not see the point in the material.
My teachers want me to share my thoughts.
My teachers give me choices about the assignments we complete in class.
I prefer to work in small groups for projects and assignments.
I prefer to work alone on projects and assignments.

Given my goal was to understand how my school system contributes to male disengagement in Level 2 ELA classes, I needed to understand the experiences of these boys. A phenomenological design lent itself to the group interview I conducted with participants because phenomenology focuses on "the experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 25–26). All of the participants were together in the interview, which allowed them to build on each other's responses. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated that "to get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary method for data collection" (p 27). Group interviews were the best method for gathering data that describes the students' experiences in Level 2 classes, and they allowed me to "find out what is 'in and on someone else's mind'" (Patton, 2015, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). As a result, I scheduled time to meet with my students to ask them questions collectively. Prior

to conducting any interview, I needed to bracket my own beliefs so that they did not interfere with my data collection. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that "when belief is temporarily suspended, consciousness itself becomes heightened and can be examined in the same way that an object of consciousness can be examined" (p. 26). Suspending belief begins prior to the interview when the researcher examines her own beliefs and identifies prejudices, a process called epoche (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These ideas are then bracketed or set aside (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Prior to my interview, I bracketed my own beliefs as a woman. I reflected on my own education, and my experiences as a female teacher. I considered my own impressions of male students. I then suspended my beliefs so that I could conduct the interview without influencing the outcome while I was asking questions and taking notes.

Through action research, I hoped to understand male disengagement and the constructs that contributed to a lack of interest and motivation. As a result, I conducted a semi-structured, group interview with selected male students in my class because this type of interview afforded me flexibility when I was working with my participants. While I prefer the semi-structured approach, I sought to create effective, open-ended interview questions that went beyond yes and no answers, and I needed to take copious notes that I later transcribed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

My interview questions focused on the participants' past experiences in a variety of classes, including ELA. I inquired as to their interests and motivations and the relevance of class. I also asked about their impressions of Level 2 classes. We discussed their preference of instructional strategies and their perceptions of themselves as learners.

The interview questions are shown in Table 3.2. Additionally, I asked follow-up questions for clarification purposes.

Table 3.2 Interview Questions

Why do you think there are so many boys in Level 2 classes?
How would you describe a Level 2 class?
Do you find merit in what we do in class? Explain.
What would make school more relevant for you?
If you were in my position, how would you change class?
When do you find it difficult to concentrate in class?
Why were you placed in a Level 2 class?

Once my students agreed to participate, the group interview took place during our regularly scheduled class period. The interview lasted 30 minutes. This was the only time of day that worked for all students. Since this is a co-taught class, I was able to conduct a group interview with my students while my co-teacher was gathering data from students with IEPs. The interview took place in a quiet bookroom. We were seated around a table, which helped to create a very conversational atmosphere. As the students responded to my questions, I took copious notes which I later evaluated and coded.

In addition to the survey and an interview with my male students, I used two classroom observations to gather data about their levels of engagement while in class. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that observations can occur in a setting "where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs," and the "observational data represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest" (p. 137). I wanted to understand

why male students are not engaged in ELA classes. Since I have direct access to my students on a near daily basis, observations were a logical data collection point. My remedial ELA classes were co-taught with a special education teacher; therefore, I had the opportunity to monitor class and note off-task behavior, such as chatting with classmates, texting, or blankly staring. Because my co-teacher was also instructing class, I had the time to observe students and take notes.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also recommended that researchers enter an observation prepared to observe specific elements. I observed the physical setting, the participants, their activities and interactions, and conversations. For instance, I noticed that behavioral issues increased when students seem bored with the material. By noting the behaviors and correlating that to the lesson, I was able to recognize patterns. While it was convenient to have a co-teacher, it was still difficult to balance my role as the teacher with my role as the researcher. It proved difficult to both teach and observe at the same time, especially since observations required a great deal of concentration and notetaking.

Finally, I conducted a focus group to gather data from my colleagues related to their perceptions of male students and student motivation levels in Level 2 classes. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that, "As a method of collecting data in qualitative research, a focus group is an interview on a topic with a group of people who have knowledge of the topic" (p. 114). I felt that this method of gathering data worked best with my colleagues for several reasons. First, focus groups allowed me to uncover teacher perceptions of Level 2 students. Often, when we are in department meetings, the conversation will digress to topics such as student behavior and difficulties with classroom management. My colleagues are willing to very openly discuss their problems.

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A focus group, while more structured than a department meeting, elicited the same type of open dialogue. Second, I gathered more genuine data rather than having my colleagues complete a survey because they simply needed to talk and did not have to worry about writing anything down. My colleagues frequently complain about the amount of paperwork they have to fill out. Therefore, I did not want to add to this burden by having them respond in writing. Engaging in a conversation as I took notes was less work for them.

To facilitate the focus group, I first sent an email to my nine colleagues explaining my research and asking for their participation. I indicated that I would not take more than 45 minutes of their time after school. All nine agreed to participate. I scheduled a mutually agreeable day and eight of the ELA teachers attended the focus group which took place in my classroom. Prior to the meeting, I sent the questions I planned to ask to the participants so that they could think about their responses, which made the focus group run more efficiently. As my colleagues responded, I took notes. My only worry with the focus group was that my colleagues would be concerned with how they were perceived if they had unfavorable opinions about Level 2 male students. However, my colleagues were generous with their time and their thoughts. Table 3.3 are the focus group questions.

Table 3.3 Focus Group Questions

How long have you been teaching?
How many Level 2 classes do you teach?
In these Level 2 classes, what is the breakdown of male to female students?
Of these male students, how many are regular education?

What are the behaviors you note in a typical Level 2 class?
How do you manage behaviors in a Level 2 class?
What are the differences you note between male and female students in Level 2 classes?
What instructional strategies do you use to engage male students in Level 2 classes?

Data Analysis Methods

I collected and analyzed qualitative data simultaneously in order to stay organized and avoid feeling overwhelmed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As I gathered information from the survey, the interview, observations, and the focus group, I kept detailed notes, comments, and annotations on the records themselves. I also determined how and where to organize the data, as well as selected a form of coding as I broke the data into units of information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of data" (p. 199). Merriam and Tisdell suggested that researchers identify categories and then move forward from there.

Phenomenological reduction is a technique whereby the researcher continually "returns to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). As a result, coding derived through phenomenological reduction allowed me to see the essence of the student experience. I routinely reflected on my interactions with my students, added to my notes, and revisited the experiences to enhance my understanding. Horizontalization, which is "the process of

laying out all data for examination and treating the data as having equal weight"
(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27), is another way to begin the coding process and identify
recurring ideas and themes. I compared the information gathered after each data
collection method to note emerging themes.

In order to ensure that this study was valid and reliable, I needed to thoroughly
examine my role in the research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that researchers can
increase validity and reliability by:

> Being explicit about the researcher's role and his or her relationship to those
> studied, making a case that the topic of the study is important, being clear about
> how the study was done, and making a convincing presentation of the findings of
> the study. (p. 240)

I established the importance of the topic and my role as an insider in this process in
Chapter 1, and I tried to remain cognizant of my role throughout the process.

Another way for me to ensure validity was to triangulate my data, which entails.
"using multiple sources of data," such as, "comparing and cross-checking data collected
through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected
from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same
people" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 245). Through a survey, an interview with students,
observations, and a focus group with teachers, I was able to check my results at many
points. I also used respondent validation, or gathering feedback from the participants, to
build validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Respondent validation helped to ensure that I
was correctly interpreting the data that I collected.

Summary

This action research study sought to evaluate the disproportionate number of male students in remediated Level 2 ELA classes. Through a survey, an interview with students, and observations in the classroom, I was able to determine if there were gender biased teaching strategies that were alienating and disengaging male students. Additionally, through practitioner inquiry, I aimed to study teacher perceptions of Level 2 ELA male students to understand the pervasive nature of the problem. I accomplished this goal through a focus group with select colleagues and then determined themes from their responses. Finally, practitioner inquiry also allowed me to evaluate my school system, which tracks students, to determine whether some inequality exists in this process.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The study occurred during the beginning of the second semester of 2022 at Red Land High School in the West Shore School District located in Pennsylvania. The purpose of this action research was to investigate the disengagement of male students in remediated ELA classes. I attempted to understand the experiences of male students in these classes and also to determine how male students are perceived by their ELA teachers. The disengagement of male students is a phenomenon occurring in Level 2 classes in all subject areas. These remediated classes are typically designed for students who demonstrate a need for additional learning support. However, male students in remediated classes are disproportionately represented: male students far outnumber female students. Additionally, some male students without identified learning disabilities are tracked in remedial classes, even though they do not need additional support. Frequently, male students are placed in these classes due to off-task behaviors and low grades, which teachers perceive as disengagement (Gopalan et al., 2017; Vantieghem et al., 2014).

The greatest concern of this disengagement is that male students are not succeeding at the same rate as female students. In fact, the opposite is true: Male students are failing in the ELA classroom, creating a gender gap in the acquisition and mastery of literacy skills (Jackson & Hilliard, 2013; Kleinfeld, 2009). Male students are less focused in the classroom, earn lower grades than female students, are more likely to require

special education services, and receive more disciplinary actions (Gurian, 2011; Kleinfeld, 2009). Male students are disengaged in ELA classes, which places them at a disadvantage for the future. For instance, most students in Level 2 classes generally express a desire to enter the workforce upon graduation rather than attend college. While entering the workforce is not a problem, this means that fewer male students are pursuing college degrees, potentially impacting their future earning potentials (Fortin et al., 2015).

This disproportionate distribution has been a relatively new trend across the curriculum at Red Land High School. Teachers are noticing that enrollment in remedial courses tends to overwhelmingly favor male students. Students in these classes also tend to have similar behavioral characteristics: They are generally louder, more off-task, difficult to manage, and unmotivated to complete work. Therefore, this study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. What are the experiences of male students in Level 2 ELA classes?

2. How are male students in the Level 2 ELA classrooms perceived by teachers?

Qualitative data illuminated the experiences of male students and the perceptions of their teachers. While the student survey provided quantitative data, this data was used to help provide insight into common experiences among male students. As a result, I identified common themes in the data that helped me to understand the phenomenon of male disengagement.

Strategy

This study represents action research using a phenomenological approach to investigate the disengagement of male students in the remediated ELA classroom. To

investigate this problem, I focused on one section of a Level 2 ELA class comprised of 10th grade students. This class consisted of 19 students: 16 boys and 3 girls. This class was also a co-taught class with a special education teacher because 13 of the students receive special education services. Additionally, I gathered data from eight ELA teachers at Red Land High School. The data collection methods included a Google survey of all male students, observations of five male students, a group interview with four male students, and a focus group with eight ELA teachers.

At the beginning of the second semester, I shared a Google survey with all of the male students in my fifth period class. The survey consisted of 18 statements to which the students responded with *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree*. Table 3.1 lists the statements in the survey. All male students, both general education and special education, completed the survey. Since this study seeks to understand the experiences of male students in remediated ELA classes, I wanted to include the perspectives of every male student. Even though this study seeks to understand why regular education students are disengaged in class, responses from all male students provided insight as to the existence of gender bias or lack of motivation. Consequently, responses from all students provided valuable feedback as to the source of disengagement in class.

After gathering information from the survey, I completed two observations of the five male, regular education students in the class who agreed to participate in the study. I excluded special education students from this data gathering because many of these students are in this remediated class because they have identified learning issues that predispose them to off-task behavior. My goal in this research study was to determine

why regular education students are disengaged in class and perhaps tracked incorrectly. During these observations, I noted any off-task behavior from the students, such as texting, talking with a classmate, sleeping, or being out of their seats.

I was able to interview four of the five regular education students during an in-class study session. My co-teacher was working with the other students in order to gather data for her own progress monitoring of special education students and to help students work on missing assignments. I used this opportunity to conduct a group interview of student participants in the ELA bookroom, which is a quiet, private place where I knew there would be no interruptions. The interview lasted about 30 minutes. The fifth regular education student, Ken, was not able to participate in the interview because he was being quarantined due to COVID-19. In this semi-structured interview, I asked several predetermined questions that I supplemented with follow-up questions.

The final data gathering point was through a focus group conducted with eight of my ELA colleagues. One colleague was unable to participate because she was being quarantined due to COVID-19. In my initial email invitation to all of my colleagues, I explained my objective and asked for their participation. Once I had the number of teachers willing to participate, I was able to secure a common day after school to discuss my focus group questions. I indicated that I would try to keep this session to no more than 45 minutes. To make our time together more efficient, I provided participants with the questions I planned to ask prior to the focus group session so that they could gather some of the data, like student distribution, ahead of time. This session lasted about 45 minutes.

Results

This section presents the results of the data points: the student survey, the group interview, the observations of my male students, and the focus group findings. The information has been segmented into themes where themes were noted.

Student Survey Results

The results of the survey can be divided into four categories of responses where themes tended to emerge. These themes are Content Relevance, Student Commitment to Learning, Student Perceptions about Teachers, and Effective Teaching Strategies.

Content Relevance

The survey results show that the content of what is being taught in class is not always relevant to the student. Only 63% of male students were interested in what they were learning in class. Even fewer students, only 31%, felt that what they were learning was preparing them for the real world. While these students did not seem to see the relevance in what they were learning in the classroom, 56% indicated that they were planning to continue their education after high school. Figure 4.1 presents the results.
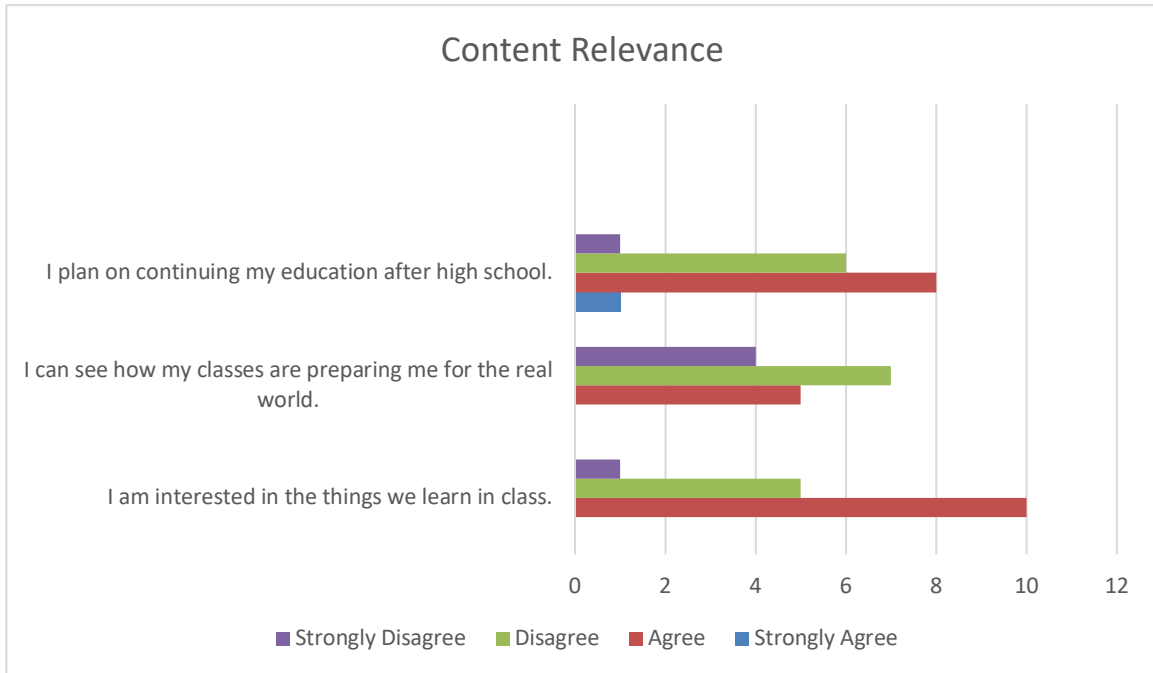
Figure 4.1 Content Relevance

Commitment to Learning

When asked about their own commitment to learning, 69% of students reported that they took pride in their work and 81% indicated that they complete their classwork and homework even when they did not see the relevance of the material. However, even though they claimed to take pride in their work and complete their work, only 44% *agreed* that they turn their work in on-time. Over half of the students, 56%, *agreed* that they were on their phones or their computers instead of completing classwork. However, students did not seem to indicate that it is difficult to remain seated. Only 37% find it difficult to remain seated. The data is presented in Figure 4.2.
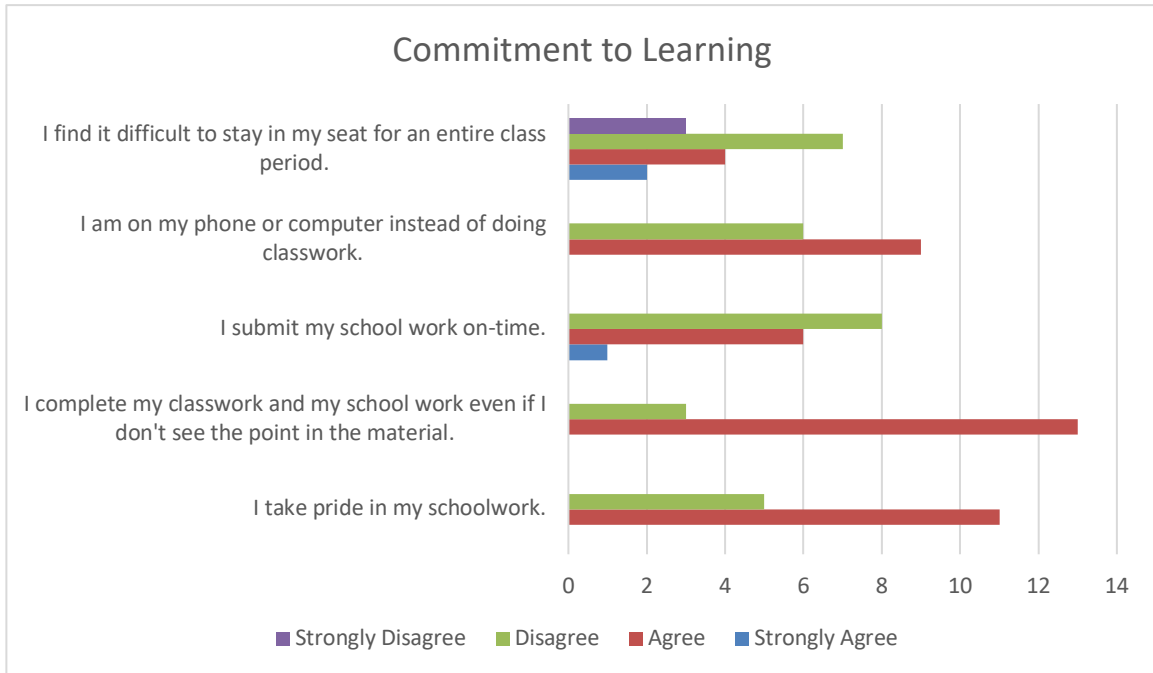
Commitment to Learning

Figure 4.2 Commitment to Learning

Student Perceptions about Teachers

The survey also attempted to gauge how students perceive they are valued by their teachers, as reported in Figure 4.3. Overwhelmingly, 94% of students *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that teachers wanted to hear their thoughts and were willing to help them succeed in class. Students also did not seem to note a disparity in the way that teachers treated male and female students with 81% of respondents indicating that teachers treated male and female students the same. However, only 25% of students believed that male students behave the way the teacher expects, whereas 94% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that female students behave the way the teacher expects. Additionally, only 45% of students seemed to think that earning good grades was more of a female trait. This idea that earning good grades was important might be due to the fact that 94% either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that their parents monitor their grades.
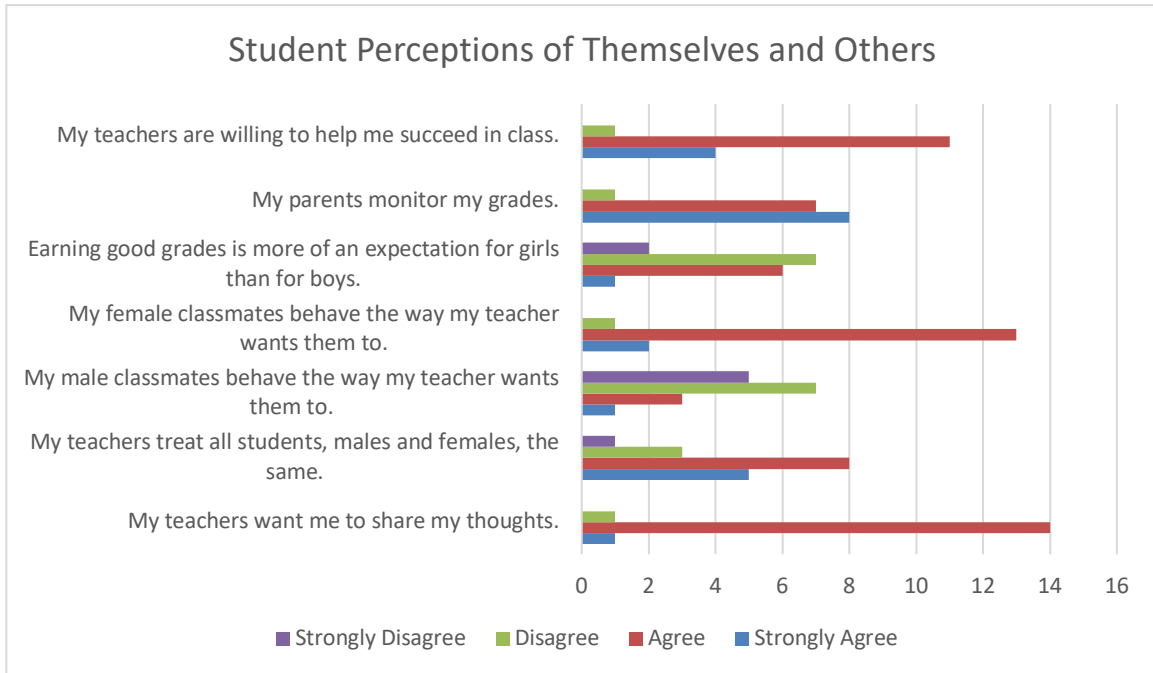
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Figure 4.3 Student Perceptions about Teachers

Effective Teaching Strategies

The survey also attempted to identify strategies that are effective in motivating students. Only 56% believe that their teachers give them choices on assignments. Also 69% preferred to work in groups on assignments, whereas 56% would prefer to work alone. This information is reflected in Figure 4.4.
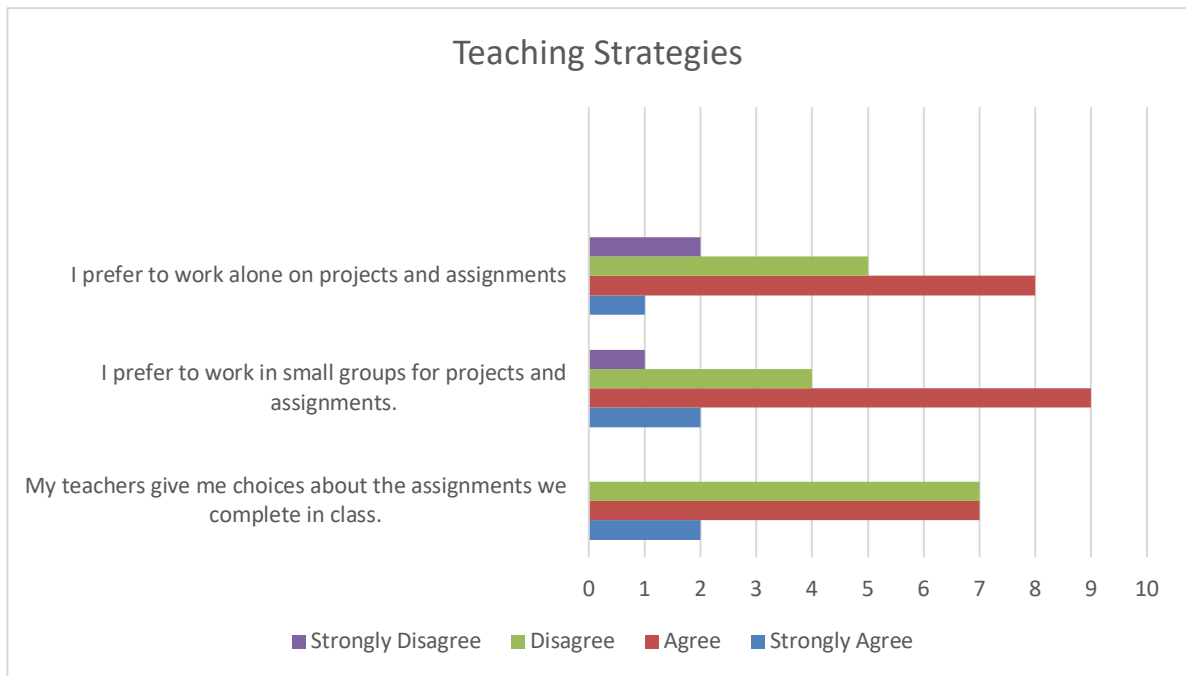
Figure 4.4 Effective Teaching Strategies

Group Interview Findings

All four participants in the interview were helpful, kind, eager to contribute, and honest about their own efforts in school, as well as their thoughts about how school is managed. In fact, on several occasions, the students would ask me, "Mrs. Martin, when are we going to do that interview thing?" The students, Adam, Eddie, Dre, and Connor, seemed transparent in their answers, even if these responses portrayed them in a negative light. Ken was absent on the day of the interview. Student responses indicated that the students were not motivated to learn because they did not see the relevance of the material taught and, therefore, preferred a less rigorous Level 2 class. Additionally, the interview highlighted the impact of the students' complicated personal lives on their abilities to complete schoolwork.

The first question I asked was: "Why do you think there are so many boys in Level 2 classes?" Every student responded to some degree that Level 2 classes are easier. Adam said that students "don't want to push themselves." Other comments included "not as much homework," "less stressful," and "level 2 classes are less effort." The idea that Level 2 was less demanding became a theme throughout the interview.

Even though there was a general acknowledgement that Level 2 classes were easier, each participant indicated that the class was not relevant to their outside lives and not engaging. Eddie indicated that most of the things learned in school could easily be looked up on Google. It would be more practical to have a class that has more "hands-on stuff." Eddie also said that students should be "encouraged to learn new things, not what we already know." Dre stated that he knows he is smart, but Level 2 is "less effort and the structured aspect of school is not in [his] wheelhouse." Dre also indicated that students should be given more choices to take courses that would be more beneficial later, rather than having the "government tell us what we need." Connor indicated that he felt bored in class because he has already read most of the material on his own. However, he would rather be bored in class than take a more rigorous class that required work.

I was curious as to how these students were placed in a Level 2 class. All four boys said they were not sure who put them into this level. However, they all had ideas on the type of student who is in this type of class. Connor stated that Level 2 classes are comprised of "all the dumb and troubled kids." Dre said that this class was for "special needs kids and kids who don't apply themselves." Eddie also indicated that Level 2 was for students with "troubled lives." Adam expressed his nervousness because, at the time, he had good grades in all of his classes, so his teachers wanted him to move up to a

higher-level next year. However, Adam did not want to do harder work and was afraid his grades would drop if he switched to a harder class. Eddie also made an interesting point. He stated that he knew he could be in a more rigorous class, but his homelife was too difficult and stressful for him to handle both the demands of running his household with his mother who worked nightshift and more homework. Eddie told the group that he had to make dinner for himself every night while also maintaining a job to help his single mother. Dre echoed this statement, indicating that he has to work every day and has no time. Connor and Adam then shared their discontent with their homelives.

Eddie then commented on the type of student who he perceived to be in AP and Level 1 classes. He said that these "preppy kids probably have parents who help them with things like homework and buy them everything they need. They have access to resources and have time for after school activities." Eddie does not have any of these resources available to him. Eddie was not bitter in his comment, but rather he was matter-of-fact. He made sure to indicate that he was not making excuses for himself or seeking sympathy. Connor aptly finished this topic by saying, "Outside life impacts inside life."

Observation Findings

Since this was a co-taught class, I had the opportunity to observe behaviors on a daily basis. However, on two occasions, while my co-teacher was reading *Lord of the Flies* to the class, I observed the behaviors of the five male regular education students. Eddie was reading along while texting occasionally during both occasions. Connor was sleeping for the entire portion of the one reading. He sat with his head laying on the desk

and only woke up when the reading stopped and someone tapped him. On the second occasion, he sat with his book closed while playing a video game on his phone.

On both occasions, Adam was reading at times, but he was being distracted at other times by side conversation. Dre was texting nearly the entire time for both observations. He also left the classroom on both occasions to get a drink. On one occasion he was also making paper airplanes out of the post-it notes we gave to the students for annotating in the novel. Ken was also texting with his earbuds in on both occasions. He concealed his phone in the book he was holding.

Focus Group Findings

Teachers who participated in the focus group have at least a decade of experience in the classroom. One teacher has been teaching for 35 years; two teachers have been teaching for 27 years; one teacher reported teaching for 24 years; two have taught for 18 years; one teacher indicated having taught for 15 years. Teachers also provided the breakdown of male to female students in their Level 2 classes, revealing there were more than double the number of male students in Level 2 ELA classes. This information is reflected in Figure 4.5. However, this does not mean that ELA classes are 50% more males than females. One teacher, for instance, reported a class with nine male students and one female student. In her other class, she had eight male students and only two female students. My distribution was similar. The class represented in this study is comprised of 16 male students and only 3 female students. My first period class is similar with nine male students and two female students.
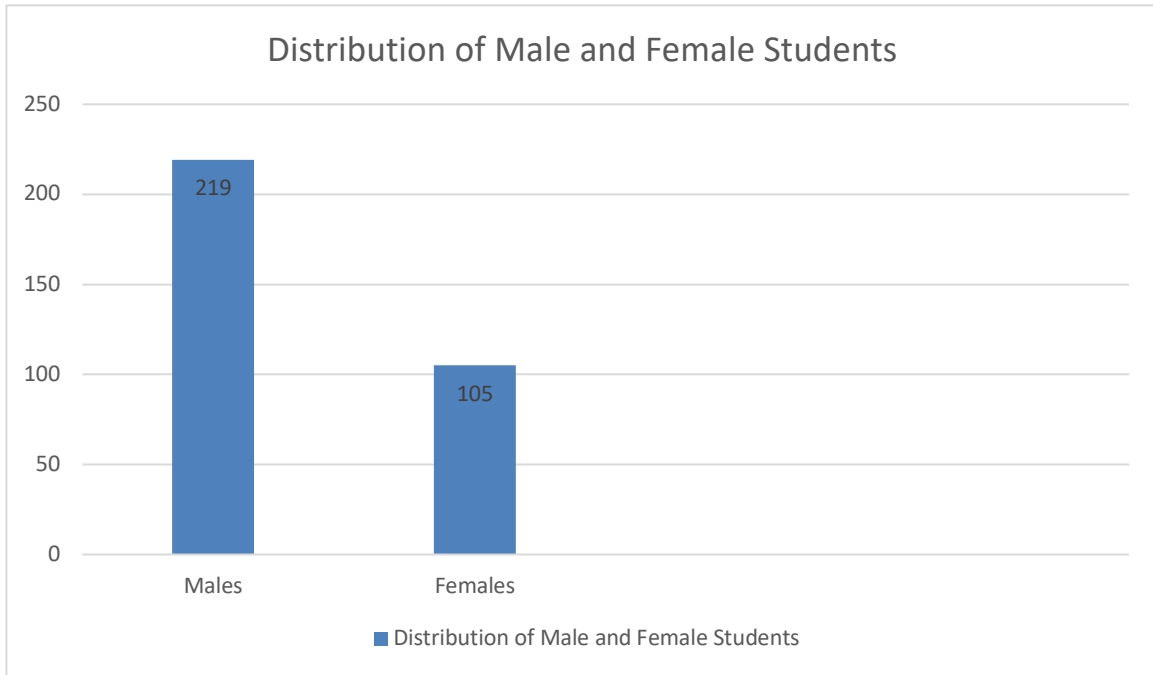
Figure 4.5 Distribution of Male and Female Students

When asked about the typical behaviors noted in Level 2 classes, teachers were consistent in their responses. Level 2 classes exhibit the following behaviors: lack of focus, calling out, apathy toward learning, cell phone use during instruction, inability to remain seated, failure to submit work on-time, disciplinary issues, and the need for direct instruction.

The teachers were also very consistent in their distinctions between male and female students in Level 2 classes. Teachers used words such as "immature," "rowdy," "unfocused," and "unmotivated." Teachers also commented that female students might sometimes get off task, but "gentle prompting" will get them back on task. Other teachers noted that female students tend to be quieter and attempt to "guide the boys." Teachers also reported that girls tend to be better with time management. To manage behaviors in

Level 2 classes, teachers indicated that they established routines and clear expectations early in the year. Many teachers also commented that providing positive feedback and making personal connections was helpful in reining in undesirable behavior.

When asked how teachers attempt to engage male students in Level 2 classes, most of the responses were similar. Teachers reported that they used humor frequently to connect with their male students. Many teachers used positive reinforcement, such as phone calls home and rewards to encourage their students to continue to do well in class. Every teacher indicated some level of flexibility. Teachers indicated that they gave their students choices in what they were learning and in the assignments they were to complete. They also stated that they provided many opportunities for movement within the classroom so that students could get out of their seats and stretch their legs. Teachers also incorporated competition in their lessons through games like Kahoot. Providing constant reinforcement and redirection was a common theme gleaned from the focus group. Finally, all teachers indicated that they provided many mini-lessons within the larger lesson in order to vary the delivery of information.

Analysis of Data Based on Research Questions

In this study, I attempted to determine why male students are disengaged in Level 2 classes. Based on the data collected from the survey, male students seemed to be disengaged because many believe that the material taught in class was not relevant to the real world. While the data indicated that male students did feel that they are treated fairly by their teachers, and they believed that their teachers wanted them to be successful, they failed to see the relevance in the content they were learning. This issue was exacerbated

by their lives outside of the classroom where they have many adult-like responsibilities. Additionally, conflict in the household often impacted their performance in school. Their experiences suggested that schoolwork was not the priority, especially when they did not see the relevance in the material.

I also sought to understand teacher perceptions of male students. The focus group data indicated that teachers note similar characteristics of Level 2 classes; students in these classes were generally louder, less focused, required more discipline, completed less homework, were distracted by their cell phones, and were unmotivated. To compensate, every teacher indicated that they provide students with classwork options when it comes to classwork. However, students did not necessarily note this effort. Teachers did not indicate that they had negative feelings about their male students; however, they did admit that Level 2 male students were generally more immature than female students. Male students were louder and exhibited a greater apathy toward school.

Supplemental Analysis of Data

Based on data collected from the teacher focus group, I noted Level 2 classes were not only disproportionately comprised of male students, but also the number of male regular education students was nearly equal to the number of male special education students. Therefore, Figure 4.6 indicates the number of male regular education and special education students in Level 2 classes.
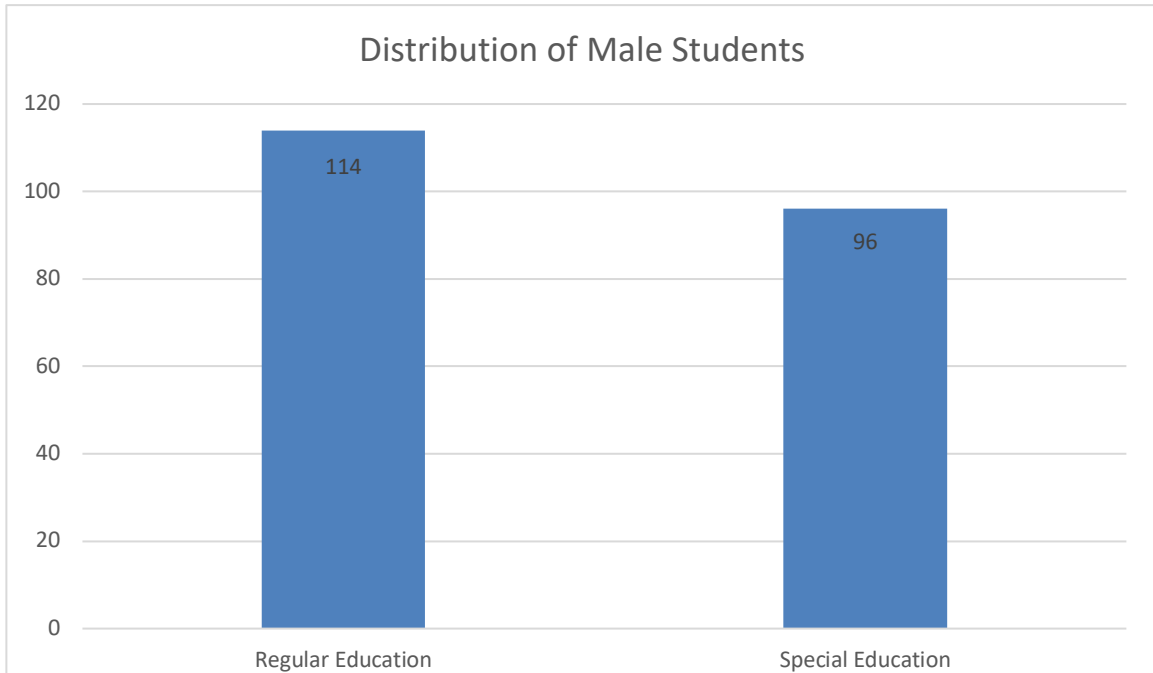
Figure 4.6 Distribution of Male Students

Summary

The purpose of this action research was to investigate the experiences of male students in remediated ELA classes and to explain the phenomenon that male students are disproportionately represented in class, often exhibiting disengagement with the content. Using data gathered from a survey, an interview, and observations, I was able to identify common themes in student responses. Male students did not feel as though the material they were learning was relevant to life outside of the classroom. However, these students did feel that their teachers were willing to help them succeed, and their teachers treated male and female students similarly. Interviews with male students revealed that many of these males took Level 2 classes because they did not want to complete additional work and because they did not have homelives conducive to completing more schoolwork. I also sought to understand teacher perceptions of male students in Level 2 classes.

Through a focus group with teacher colleagues, I found that teachers commonly believe that male students were more immature than female students. They also reported that male students were less focused and more difficult to motivate. Teachers did believe that they gave their students options to make the material more relevant for them; however, student responses seemed to indicate the contrary. Male students did not feel like they were given options in the work that they were learning or producing.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 5 provides a summary of my research findings and presents conclusions gleaned from this action research pertaining to the experiences of male students in remediated 10th grade ELA classes and the perceptions of their teachers. I also discuss the implications for practice, as well as offer suggestions for future research and recommend changes to educational practice that might engage male students in Level 2 ELA classes and beyond.

I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of male students in Level 2 ELA classes?
2. How are male students in the Level 2 ELA classrooms perceived by teachers?

To accomplish my aim, I surveyed 16 male students in my Period 5 ELA class and conducted a group interview with four regular education male students about their experiences in school. I also conducted observations of these same students and gathered information from my colleagues about their experiences teaching Level 2 ELA classes through a focus group.

Motivation theory and GST formed my framework for understanding the problem of male disengagement in remediated ELA classes. Motivation theory has two major facets: expectancy-value theory and intrinsic-extrinsic motivational theory. Expectancy-value contends that students perform based on their probability of success and the value

they place on the task (Irvine, 2018). As a result, students will avoid tasks if they feel as though they will not successfully complete the task. Unfortunately, as students grow older, these negative beliefs about their abilities compound, and students begin to avoid tasks altogether. I considered that my male students might not engage in class because they were not confident with their literacy skills and, as a result, avoided completing the work I assigned.

The other facet of motivation theory, intrinsic-extrinsic motivation theory, pertains to the reasons students are motivated to complete any task. If a student is intrinsically motivated, he will complete a task simply because he is interested in learning. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, occurs when a student completes a task in order to gain a reward, like a grade (Irvine, 2018). Extrinsic motivation, however, can actually be a demotivator, especially if students are not interested in the task. The reward of a grade does not matter to a student who sees no value in the learning task. Again, I wondered if my students did not see value in the assignments and reading material we were completing in class. If students failed to see the relevance in the material, they would not engage in the learning process. The reward of a grade would hardly matter.

GST posits that children undergo sex typing from very early ages and, therefore, behave according to what they perceive as being typically male or female qualities (Bem, 1981). Unfortunately, literacy-based courses are viewed as being a more feminine pursuit (Vantieghem et al., 2014). As a result, I considered that perhaps boys were disengaged in ELA courses because these courses do not conform to the standards of what is considered masculine. Additionally, I wondered if teachers viewed their male students differently

because certain male behaviors are viewed as more disruptive to the classroom as compared to the behaviors of female students (Vantieghem et al., 2014).

Summary of Findings

I gathered data over a 4-week period, during which time we were reading two different novels. My co-teacher and I were in the process of finishing the novel *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, and then we began the novel *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. Both of these novels are considered high interest selections for male readers because they feature male characters who are engaged in what is typically considered male behavior. *All American Boys*, in particular, should have been appealing to our male students because the contemporary novel addresses timely themes, like the dangers of racism and the bonds of friendship. Our daily goal was to make class as engaging as possible for our students. Interestingly, the results of the survey, the interview, and class observations with four of my students indicated otherwise. The experiences of my male students and the perceptions of their teachers provided insight as to why these students were disengaged.

During the group interview and through the survey, my students indicated that they did not find class engaging largely because they did not see the relevancy of material they were learning. All of the students I interviewed attended the vocational school where they spent their mornings learning about the trade they planned to pursue after graduation. When they returned to Red Land, they went from working hands-on with materials to sitting in desks and learning from books. I can understand why they felt that my class was not relevant. Clearly, these students did not see a connection between my classroom and

their lives outside of school. However, creating this connection is vital to engaging male students in the classroom (Brozo, 2006).

Even though I tried to provide reading material that is current and relevant to modern day, this material was not hands-on and did not translate smoothly to their future work lives. While the focus group results indicated that teachers tried to provide their students with options, students did not feel that this was accurate. Providing options is recommended to help engage students; however, these options must be built around the interests of the students (Brozo, 2006). There was some disconnect between the choices teachers were offering and student interpretation of the relevance of these choices. Perhaps students did not view their assignments as choices because they failed to see the relevance. If something was not viewed as relevant, even if students were given a choice, did this choice even matter to the student? While teachers felt they were using effective teaching strategies, students did not recognize these efforts. As motivation theory posits, students do not complete tasks if they feel as though they will be unsuccessful at the task and if they do not place value on the task (Irvine, 2018). Both circumstances could apply to my students' lack of motivation to complete their coursework.

Students also have conflicted personal lives, which impacted their performance in the classroom and commitment to learning. All students indicated that they had to work nearly every day in order to help their families. They also reported varying degrees of familial support and a general discontent with their homelives. While the students I interviewed did not have diagnosed learning disabilities, male students are more likely to exhibit emotional disturbances, be referred to the office for behavioral issues, and die by suicide (Kleinfeld, 2009). On the other hand, they are less likely to be engaged in

extracurricular activities, take AP courses, and graduate from college (Fortin et al., 2015; Kleinfeld, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Without support and encouragement from home, the students did not seem to value what they were learning in the classroom. The most revealing information from the interview were the comments from the interviewees about students who were enrolled in upper-level classes. The boys interviewed definitely felt as though these upper-level students had an advantage because there were people at home who cared about them.

Disturbingly, all of the students I interviewed had no idea as to why they were placed into a Level 2 class, even though they also admitted to the fact that they did not want more rigor. My students complained about being bored, but they also admitted to setting lower standards for themselves, which is typical of students who lack motivation (Fortin et al., 2015). However, this mis-leveling might also be one reason for their disengagement because the class is not matched to their ability level. If the students find class to be too easy, or if they view class as a special needs class, they may not feel challenged to learn. Clearly, motivation will wane if students feel as though they are not engaged in the learning task and find no intrinsic value in the learning (Irvine, 2018).

The fact that these students perceived they were in a special needs class might have impacted their own self-perceptions. Students might interpret their leveling as a reflection of their teachers' perceptions of student ability levels, which would lead to demotivation. Students tend to believe that their own opinions of themselves are shared by the teacher. Essentially, in the student's mind, the teachers hold the same negative viewpoint (Bozack, 2011). This negative self-opinion perpetuates the lack of motivation. If the students think that their teachers believe they need to be in a special needs class, then the

students are going to have a negative assessment of their own abilities. Why should a student try if he thinks that his teacher believes he cannot do the task, which is why he is in a remediated level of the class?

While I speculated that gender bias played a part in the experiences of male students, their responses on both the survey and during the interview indicated otherwise. GST posits that males and females act according to their sex typing, which means that each gender attempts to act according to the stereotypical characteristics of the gender with which they identify (Bem, 1981). As such, literacy-based courses are usually associated with more feminine qualities (Vantieghem et al., 2014). However, in the survey, most male students *agreed* that earning good grades was important and that this quality was not just for female students. Thus, male students did not note a gender bias. Of course, gender bias may still exist: Teachers and students might hold implicit gender biases of which they are unaware.

Teachers, as well, did not feel as though they treated male and female students differently. However, they did note a difference in behavior, which is consistent with research and with male student perceptions (Vantieghem et al., 2014). The majority of male students *agreed* that teachers treated male and female students the same, even though male students admitted that they did not behave according to teacher expectations. Male and female students clearly exhibit different behaviors in the classroom. Did these teachers note the behavior because the boys were so egregiously different? Or, did teachers note the behavior because Level 2 classrooms have so many more male students? The disproportionate composition of class could be the reason teachers noted the behavioral disparity.

While teachers did note that male students are more off-task than their female students, they also indicated that their remediated classes are heavily populated by male students. A classroom full of active boys is difficult to manage because they are not able to sit quietly in desks for extended periods of time like female students do (Norman, 2020). Again, would these behaviors exist to the same extent if classes were more evenly distributed? In fact, 15 years ago when I taught Level 2 juniors, I had more evenly distributed classes and the behaviors I noted then were much different from today. While this is anecdotal information, my previous experiences do indicate that the composition of class, which was also more evenly distributed with special education students, was far easier to manage. Nonetheless, teachers generally reward behaviors that are quiet and compliant, which is not how male students generally behave (Gurian, 2011). Rather, male students tend to act out and play the class clown instead of behaving in a more studious manner (Vantieghem et al., 2014).

The most promising information I gleaned was that the students felt as though their teachers wanted them to be successful, which was a great discovery because students sometimes hold beliefs about themselves based on what their teachers think of them (Bozak, 2011). If students believe that their teachers' opinions about them are positive, these students will have similar feelings about themselves. Obviously, teachers and students must have some positive relationship building occurring because students need to know that teachers want them to be successful. This relationship could be the key to reversing the disengagement trend.

Implications for Practice

If students are not engaged in the curriculum, they are not going to learn. For male students, it is imperative to increase motivation to help these students to succeed in the classroom and beyond. Increasing engagement could occur by sharing this information with the administration at my school, offering students more choices in their assignments, learning more about their personal lives, providing increased opportunities for partner or group assignments, and equipping all teachers with the strategies necessary to teach literacy skills.

A first step to engaging male students in the classroom is to inform the administration at my school of the research discovered through this process and the data gleaned from my own action research. The administrative team is committed to the success of our students; however, they are unaware of the unbalanced scheduling practices. They are also unaware of the status of male students in the ELA classroom and across the curriculum. Once I share this information, I can then engage in conversations towards re-engaging male students.

Next, it is essential for teachers to provide students with choices where they see real-world relevance. The literacy curriculum should reflect real-world passions to better engage all students (Brozo, 2006). In order to build these lessons, teachers must ask their students about their lives and generate activities and projects based on this feedback. Helping students to construct meaning based on their own background knowledge and experiences is a hallmark to teaching literacy skills and is beneficial for all students (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Teachers should also allow students to select their own

reading material so that the students feel as though they actually have choices in the curriculum. When teachers miss the opportunity for genuine learning based around student interest, and the "building of knowledge and promoting of understanding" (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 15), they eliminate the possibility for re-engagement for all students in the classroom.

Additionally, teachers need to provide more opportunities for students to interact. When I observed my students as they were reading, I noted many off-task behaviors, such as texting or sleeping. However, when I gave my class group activities where they were able to interact with each other and physically move around the classroom, all students tended to be more engaged. This movement and the ability to interact with one another often helps to offset a lack of focus (Farrell & Gray, 2019). As a result, teachers need to provide more opportunities for group assignments. Even though many students indicated on the survey that they preferred to work alone, there seemed to be more engagement when students had opportunities to interact, and they particularly enjoyed when I incorporated some type of competition in the lesson. Male students tend to enjoy a classroom that allows for both movement and competition (Johnson & Gooliaff, 2013).

Additionally, teachers need to provide more one-on-one opportunities to learn about students' lives outside of the classroom, perhaps through conducting periodic conferences with students or through journaling. I was impressed with my students' willingness to share about their personal struggles. While both male and female students experience conflicts in the home, male students represent 76% of the school population with emotional disturbances (Kleinfeld, 2009, p. 122). They are also more likely than girls to die by suicide (Kleinfeld, 2009). Male students do not seem to be able to cope with

personal conflict. Therefore, teachers need to better understand their experiences outside of the classroom.

Finally, teachers need to be equipped with the strategies necessary to teach literacy skills. Unfortunately, teachers are leaving the profession at alarming rates, and they frequently cite lack of support as the primary reason for this departure (Warsame & Valles, 2018). At Red Land High School, more than a third of the teaching staff are new teachers. The problem with an influx of novice teachers is that "few teacher preparation programs equip their graduates with the necessary knowledge and skills to embed literacy principles and practices within their subject area" (Savitz et al., 2019, p. 224).

Additionally, many veteran teachers believe that Language Arts teachers are responsible for teaching literacy skills, and, therefore, miss opportunities to help students develop reading strategies across the curriculum (Crum, 2008). When students struggle to read and write, they are more likely to drop-out of school, not graduate because they cannot pass state mandated tests, leave college because they are unprepared, or obtain jobs that require unskilled labor (Savitz et al., 2019). Sadly, 68% of eighth-grade students do not possess the literacy skills necessary to produce proficient work (Crum, 2008), which means that many ninth-grade students are beginning their high school careers without the literacy skills necessary to be successful in the classroom. In response, it is imperative that all teachers—not just Language Arts teachers—must embed literacy skills in their lessons. This transformation in the classroom can only take place with professional development that prepares teachers, both veteran and novice, to utilize and model these skills in the classroom. Content area teachers are particularly poised to help students to integrate literacy strategies with content area literacy thereby "providing

students with reading strategies to help them access content-specific texts across disciplines" (Savitz, et al., 2019, p. 225). In order for students to internalize literacy skills, teachers must be taught to actively instruct students in their reading and writing.

Limitations

This study was limited by several outside forces that may have impacted the findings. First, I was limited by the amount of information I have about each student. Unfortunately, I cannot see historical grades from middle school. Due to this lack of information, I was unable to determine why these students were tracked in a Level 2 class from middle school to freshman year of high school.

This study was also limited because I do not control scheduling. Essentially, my co-teacher and I play the hand we are dealt. The students are assigned to us, and we do the best that we can with the students assigned to us on our rosters. This class was not only disproportionately populated with male students, but it was disproportionately comprised of special education students. I was limited to five male regular education students because they were the only five students assigned to my roster. Nearly 70% of the students in this class needed some type of additional educational support. This unequal scheduling made differentiating the curriculum extremely difficult, and it severely limited my sample. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, teaching is sometimes like herding cats: getting all students moving in the same direction at the same time is difficult. Disproportionately populating classes with special education students exacerbates the problem. This class was also limited because I did not have diverse ethnic backgrounds represented, nor did I have any student from the LGBTQ community.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research in this area of study should include using a larger sample size, evaluating the leveling practices at the middle school and high school levels, and gathering data about the lives of students outside of the classroom environment.

In order to fully understand the problem of male disengagement, a larger sample size that extends to other subject areas is necessary to notice trends in disengagement. This larger sample size might then be able to capture the perspectives of students from more diverse backgrounds, including students from the LGBTQ community. Colleagues in other curricular areas have shared similar concerns about the disengagement of male students in remedial classes. They have also noted the disproportionate number of male to female students in these classes. Ultimately, more boys are in remedial classes, which is a trend reflected nationwide (Jackson & Hilliard, 2013). A more comprehensive sampling would provide increased data to evaluate and would also indicate any trends that exist. There would also be a greater chance of gathering data on the experiences of students from more diverse backgrounds and from the LGBTQ community.

Based on my students' interview responses, it is clear that they have relatively no idea how or why they were placed in a Level 2 ELA class, which begins in middle school. This trend indicates that students are either unaware of their options, or they are mis-leveled by their teachers even before they enter high school. While the students I interviewed indicated that they did not want to be in a more challenging class, they also indicated that my class was too easy for them. The fact that class might not be challenging enough could be a factor in their disengagement.

Scheduling practices need to be reevaluated at the high school level. The fact that nearly 70% of my Period 5 class was comprised of special education students indicates that there is a serious scheduling issue that creates an inequity in the classroom. The class I utilized for this action research was a co-taught class, with both a regular education teacher and a special education teacher available to the students. In a well-scheduled, well-run, co-taught class, students are unaware of who is the regular education teacher and who is the special education teacher. Additionally, students should be unable to detect which students are regular education versus special education. The most interesting and revealing piece of information I uncovered was the response from my one regular education student who believed that he was in a "special needs class." My co-teacher and I believe that co-taught classes have become a dumping ground for special education students. A co-taught classroom is designed to meet the needs of special education students who would benefit from being taught in a blended classroom. However, when the class is no longer blended or balanced between special education and regular education, the intent is lost. This practice is unacceptable practice. Students need to be meaningfully placed in classes where they have the opportunity to learn and succeed and not because they are associated with paperwork.

Finally, greater information about students' lives outside of the classroom is necessary to fully understand their experiences. First, the students I interviewed all indicated that they needed to work to help their families financially. Additionally, they all indicated their desires to have classes that directly related to their desired career goals, like the ones they have at vocational school. None of my students indicated that they had free time to engage in extra-curricular activities, such as sports or volunteerism.

Therefore, I am left to wonder, do students in remedial classes have more adult-like responsibilities that prevent them from focusing on school related tasks, such as class and activities? Educators must consider students' lives outside of the classroom, and the impact this factor has on their performance in the classroom.

Conclusion

Male students in remediated classes are disengaged for a variety of reasons. They do not feel that the content covered in class is relevant to their lives. Additionally, many of these students have complicated home lives, which impacts their performance in the classroom. Male students are often placed in remedial classes for reasons unknown to them, which means that they are potentially missing out on opportunities to be challenged in classes with a rigor level that matches their ability levels. The disproportionate number of male students and students receiving special education services in these classes is also problematic, which further indicates that there is a potential scheduling issue. To help further engage male students, teachers like me not only need to ensure that male students are able to work on group activities where they are interacting with other classmates, but we also need to better understand students' experiences outside of the classroom. While this may seem like a cliché, we need to make better efforts toward really understanding the personal experiences of our students if we want to engage them in class.

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APPENDIX A

GOOGLE SURVEY QUESTIONS

I take pride in my schoolwork.
My teachers are willing to help me succeed.
I submit my schoolwork on-time.
My teachers treat all students, males and females, the same.
My parents monitor my grades.
I am on my phone or computer in class instead of doing my classwork.
I find it difficult to stay in my seat for an entire class period.
I am interested in the things we learn in class.
I can see how my classes are preparing me for the real world.
My male classmates behave the way my teacher wants them to.
My female classmates behave the way my teacher wants them to.
Earning good grades is more of an expectation for girls than for boys.
I plan on continuing my education after high school.
I complete my classwork and my homework even if I do not see the point in the material.
My teachers want me to share my thoughts.
My teachers give me choices about the assignments we complete in class.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Why do you think there are so many boys in Level 2 classes?
How would you describe a Level 2 class?
Do you find merit in what we do in class? Explain.
What would make school more relevant for you?
If you were in my position, how would you change class?
When do you find it difficult to concentrate in class?
Why were you placed in a Level 2 class?

APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

How long have you been teaching?
How many Level 2 classes do you teach?
In these Level 2 classes, what is the breakdown of male to female students?
Of these male students, how many are regular education?
What are the behaviors you note in a typical Level 2 class?
How do you manage behaviors in a Level 2 class?
What are the differences you note between male and female students in Level 2 classes?
What instructional strategies do you use to engage male students in Level 2 classes?