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Perspectives of Kindergarten through Second Grade Teachers Regarding Methods to Promote Student Engagement in Learning

Laura O'Hayer
Walden University

Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Laura O'Hayer

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

Review Committee
Dr. Mary Trube, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty
Dr. Grace Lappin, Committee Member, Education Faculty
Dr. Amy White, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
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Abstract

Perspectives of Kindergarten through Second Grade Teachers

Regarding Methods to Promote Student Engagement in Learning

by

Laura O'Hayer

EdS, Walden University, 2017

MAT, Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2009

BA, Savannah College of Art and Design, 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

The problem addressed through this basic qualitative study was low levels of engagement in learning exhibited by kindergarten through second (K-2) grade students in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. The purpose of this study was to explore how K-2 teachers promoted student engagement in learning. The conceptual framework combined constructivist theory and the attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction (ARCS) model. Two research questions guided exploration of how teachers incorporated active instructional practices and provided frameworks for learning; and how teachers incorporated questioning strategies, hands on learning activities, and problem solving exercises. Data were collected from digitally audio taped interviews with 15 K-2 teachers. Data analysis followed an inductive process to identify codes, patterns, categories, and themes. Seven themes emerged related to strategies that teachers used to engage students: (1) creating a positive learning environment; (2) using hands on instructional practices; (3) adjusting activities to meet student learning styles; (4) varying group size; (5) reinforcing goals of behavior; (6) motivating through various rewards; (7) providing memory enhancers, clues, and signals. Recommendations included further research in teachers' use of depth of knowledge and grouping strategies. Findings may be used for positive social change through increased student engagement in learning due to teacher awareness, understanding, and intentionality regarding practices that engage students and improve student academic achievement, noncognitive skills, motivation to learn, and attitudes toward school.

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Dedication

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my mother for instilling in me an intrinsic desire to be a lifelong learner, for being a wonderful role model, and helping me to believe I could achieve anything I set my mind to at any age. Thank you for always listening and supporting me. An enormous thank you, also, to my loving husband, Larry for cheering me on, cheering me up, and helping me get some much-needed fun breaks. I could not have made it to the end of this journey without you. To my beautiful daughters Mackenzie and Grace, I am thankful for your patience and understanding when this huge undertaking kept me from participating in other events, for your belief that I could accomplish this, and for your delightful spirits. May you always believe that you are capable of anything you wish to achieve!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This basic qualitative study with interviews was conducted to address the local problem of low levels of student engagement in learning exhibited by kindergarten through second grade (K-2) students enrolled in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. Researchers have suggested that low levels of student engagement in learning affect children beyond the local district to include areas throughout the nation (Fifolt & Morgan, 2019; Hojnoski et al., 2020; Pedler et al., 2020). This study was needed because when students at the early childhood level are not engaged in learning, their disengagement can lead to numerous negative related consequences that include reduced academic success, aversion for school and learning, frustration, and undesirable student behaviors (Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). Findings of this study may potentially contribute to positive social change by increasing student engagement in learning as a result of greater teacher awareness and knowledge of practices that engage students and improve their academic achievement and noncognitive skills. Findings may also potentially provide K-2 teachers information related to specific, applicable, and developmentally appropriate instructional practices revealed following an interview protocol based on the conceptual framework. In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of the study's background, problem, purpose, and related research questions. I also justify the conceptual framework, explain the nature of the study, and provide definitions of key terms. Finally, in this chapter I outline related assumptions, the scope and delimitations, limitations of the study, and the significance of how the findings can lead to positive social change.

Background

Researchers have found a relationship between student academic engagement and their levels of academic success and thus have recommended further investigations are needed to explore how teachers increase student engagement (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Cochran et al., 2017; Hojnoski et al., 2020; Zhoa et al., 2019). Cochran et al. (2017) investigated student engagement at the elementary (K-5) level and found students in learner centered classrooms exhibited more motivation and engagement in learning activities and recommended further research to identify specific methods that engage students and promote their learning. Hojnoski et al. (2020) focused their research on measurements of student success during their early years to identify methods that promoted student school success and recommend further research in the topic of engagement that included a range in student ages within a variety of settings for young children. Zhao et al. (2019) investigated teacher support of student engagement in learning and recommended additional research is needed in three areas of student engagement: (a) enhanced understanding on how student engagement is impacted over time, (b) creation of a measure of increased academic success linked to increased engagement in learning, and (c) identification of factors in the school and at home affect student engagement. Researchers have also focused on the topic of low levels of student engagement or student disengagement. Seminal research by Ladd and Dinella (2009) found that students who consistently demonstrated low levels of engagement during their early childhood years had difficulty in achieving long term academic success. These researchers highlighted the need for further research to reverse this finding by identifying

how early childhood teachers improved student engagement during their early childhood years (Ladd & Dinella, 2009).

At the local primary grade school, faculty meeting minutes documented, via reports from K-2 teachers, that students have demonstrated low levels of engagement, were disengaged from learning during academic sessions, and were difficult to motivate. Meeting minutes also reflected K-2 teachers' reports that students were exhibiting lack of engagement in learning through their off-task behaviors, learned helplessness, and lack of motivation to learn; these behaviors were having a negative effect on student academic achievement (Faculty meeting minutes, February 2021). Teachers reported that lack of student engagement was heightened during virtual learning which took place during the stay-at-home mandates in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, teachers stated that when students resumed face-to-face instruction in traditional classrooms in March 2021, K-2 students continued to exhibit low levels of engagement in learning (Faculty meeting minutes, March 23, 2021). Fifolt and Morgan (2019) and Pedler et al. (2020) explained that student disengagement is an educational crisis on a national level that can greatly impact students' academic achievement. At the local level, stakeholders consisting of school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members have concluded that the effects of COVID-19 on student engagement have been significant (personal communication, October 2021). A gap in practice was evident from K-2 teachers' faculty meeting minutes from February 2021 through October 2021 at the local primary grade school between the current level of student engagement in instruction and what was needed related to student engagement for students to be academically

successful. Teachers recognized the local need to address students' low levels of engagement and the need for optimum practices that result in high levels of student engagement that promote student academic success.

Prior studies that focused on student engagement often related to specific tools, models, assessment methods, or a relationship to other factors such as truancy, educational environment, or lack of parental support (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Cochoran et al., 2017; Hojnoski et al., 2020; Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Zhao et al., 2019). However, some researchers have suggested that studies that data from teachers about their practices to successfully engage students in learning are needed (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Cochran et al., 2017; Hojnoski et al., 2020). Recommendations for further research on increasing students' engagement is found in both current and seminal literature (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Cochoran et al., 2017; Hojnoski et al., 2020; Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Zhao et al., 2019). Therefore, my basic qualitative study was needed because the lack of student engagement both locally and nationally was identified by researchers as a growing crisis and needed to be examined (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Cochran et al., 2017; Hojnoski et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2019).

Problem Statement

The problem addressed through this basic qualitative study is low levels of engagement in learning exhibited by K-2 students in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. As noted in the background section, minutes from several faculty meetings at the local elementary school indicated that students demonstrated low levels of engagement in learning. Statewide expectations for early childhood teacher

performance have increased due to standardized testing pressures, loss of instructional time due to the pandemic, students' challenging behavior, limited time to address the needs of all students, and other unplanned matters (State Department of Education, 2022). These factors have resulted in low levels of student engagement (Local K-2 grade level meeting minutes, 2022). Pedler et al. (2020) found that students who are disengaged from learning can lose as much as 7 months equivalent of learning and development. Researchers have found widespread and consistent examples of student disengagement and recommended further research is needed to address this national crisis (Estévez et al., 2021; Fifolt & Morgan, 2019; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). Fifolt and Morgan (2019) explained that student disengagement is a severe concern facing the American education system and one that can have serious and long-lasting effects on student success in school. Further research on student engagement was needed to explore practices that K-2 teachers use to address low levels of student engagement that affect their academic success (Fifolt & Morgan, 2019; Hojnoski et al., 2020). This study was important as it addressed a meaningful gap in practice between findings of related literature that identified engagement as a critical component of education and the local setting where K-2 teachers identified low levels of student engagement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how K-2 teachers promote student engagement in learning. Previous studies conducted by researchers, such as those by Fifolt and Morgan (2019), Hojnoski et al. (2020), and Pedler et al. (2020), have found that more research is needed relating to students' lack of engagement. For

example, Fifolt and Morgan (2019) suggested that with proper support, interventions, and instructional strategies, student motivation and engagement can be greatly improved. The fundamental research paradigm applied to their study was based upon the theory of constructivism (Fifolt & Morgan, 2019). Estévez et al. (2021) had similar findings and acknowledged that engagement is directly related to academic achievement. Different than existing studies, the research conducted for this dissertation may provide data to identify practices for increasing student engagement that teachers use to make instructional time more engaging, which results in an increase in student academic success. Therefore, the concept of interest was to explore practices to promote student engagement. To address the gap associated with the lack of existing research on practice related to teachers engaging students in learning, I interviewed 15 teachers with a least 3 years of teaching experience at the K-2 level.

Research Questions

Two research questions guide this study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do kindergarten through second grade teachers promote student engagement by incorporating the use of active instructional practices to promote critical thinking and provide a framework about how children best learn, grow, and develop?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do kindergarten through second grade teachers promote student engagement by incorporating questioning to gain children’s points of view, active or hands on learning, and problem solving skills?

Conceptual Framework

The key concept of this study was K-2 student low levels of engagement in learning. The conceptual framework that guided this study was the combination of Bruner's constructivist theory and Keller's attention, relevance, confidence, satisfaction (ARCS) model. Both concepts are supported by foundational child development theories such as Piaget's cognitive constructivism theory and Vygotsky's social constructivism theory, which provide insight into the way children learn (Brunner, 1966; Keller, 1979). Bruner (1966) recommended the use of active instructional practices to promote critical thinking and provide a framework about how children best learn, grow, and develop. The ARCS model provides a framework of instructional practices which incorporate children's points of view, active or hands on learning, and problem solving skills (Julià & Antolí, 2019). The framework was grounded in constructivist theory and the ARCs model which is based on theories of child development and how children learn best. The conceptual framework was used to create two research questions that guided the study. The conceptual framework was used to guide my investigation of teachers' perspectives on K-2 student engagement in learning. The conceptual framework will be outlined in more detail in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative study research design with interviews to explore how K-2 teachers promote student engagement in learning. High levels of student engagement have been linked to more motivation to learn (Cochran et al., 2017) and student academic success (Hojnoski et al., 2020; Zhoa et al., 2019); while low levels of engagement have

been linked to negative student outcomes and lack of academic success (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017). Basic qualitative methodology was the most suitable choice for my research to address the research questions because it allowed me to collect nonnumerical data to gain a clear understanding of related concepts, experiences, and opinions from K-2 teacher perspectives. Qualitative researchers seek meaning by going beyond statistics (Kalra et al., 2013). I developed an interview protocol, which was reviewed and approved by an expert in early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), the intent of using qualitative interviews as a data collection tool is to accumulate as much information as possible regarding the subject, both in verbal and nonverbal language and to encourage and elicit participant experiences in rich detail. I also collected data using digital audiotapes that were transcribed, coded, and analyzed by me using a thematic analysis process. Methodology will be further elaborated upon in Chapter 3.

Definitions

Experiential learning: Alvi and Gillies (2021) explained that experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) is based on a cycle of learning through reflection on one's experiences. The four stages include concrete learning, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Alvi & Gillies, 2021; Kolb, 1984). These components can foster the effectiveness of learning and be used in multiple learning circumstances including hands on activities and field trips.

Hands on learning: Martella et al. (2020) described hands on learning as activities that require dynamic participation of the learner. Hands on learning can be used in a wide

variety of educational settings, with all ages and academic subjects. Hands on learning may also be referred to as activity oriented or active learning in some related studies.

Motivation: Motivation refers to goal-oriented behaviors or the intrinsic desire to accomplish tasks independently (Haerens et al., 2018). Motivation is the driver of one's general performance and persistence and is measured in one's level of desire to do something (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2020).

Problem based learning: According to Kurt and Sezek (2021), problem based learning is an instructional method that encourages students to work collaboratively, find solutions to learning challenges, and fosters cognitive development. It is rooted in the constructivism theory in which students build new knowledge and skills upon the foundation of prior experiences and knowledge (Navy & Kaya, 2020).

Student engagement: Engagement is a widely used term that can have multiple connotations. For this study, student engagement relates to the level in which students are actively involved in learning activities, as well as their interactions with teachers, peers, and within the educational environment (Nguyen et al., 2018; Axelson & Flick, 2011).

Academic enablers: Academic enablers can be described as students' behaviors and general outlook on school and learning (Anthony et al., 2021). They directly relate to engagement and support cognitive growth. According to Anthony et al. (2021), evidence indicates that these factors are an essential element in fostering students' school success.

Assumptions

For this basic qualitative research study with interviews, I made several assumptions based on my prior knowledge and experiences as a professional educator.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), researchers hold assumptions that involve circumstances they believe to be true, and their assumptions should be acknowledged. First, I assumed that interview participants' responses represented the actual experiences of the teachers and their perspectives about their students' experiences regarding the teaching and learning processes. Additionally, I also assumed that teachers were truthful in their responses regarding the required criteria: current K-2 teachers with a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience in rural schools located in the southern region of United States. Second, I assumed that all teacher participants were familiar with the basic concepts of this study including student engagement, motivation, and academic success. Finally, I assumed that each participant cares about their students' academic success and that they answered questions openly, honestly, and as accurately as possible. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), assumptions are a necessary element in a study that includes data collection and analysis and a report of the findings.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the research was confined to 15 K-2 classroom teachers who worked in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. The focus of the study was to explore how these teachers promote students' engagement in learning. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were selected through social media and the Walden University research participant pool with a snowballing strategy. A recruitment letter was distributed through social media and the Walden pool using approved listing requirements and clearly explained the necessary criteria for volunteer participation in this study, as follows: seeking kindergarten-second grade teachers with 3

or more years of teaching experience in a rural area located in the southern region of the United States. Excluded from this study was any educator who is not currently teaching K-2 students, teachers who do not work in rural schools, and teachers with less than three years of experience at the K-2 level.

Delimitations are factors that I embedded in my research plan and were established exclusively on personal choices (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). There are numerous avenues relating to student engagement that I could have explored, however I opted to focus on how teachers promote students' engagement in learning due to my own experience, role, and passion for early childhood education. I also hope that this path leads to positive change due to increases in both awareness and understanding about practices that engage students in learning. Greater awareness and understanding about the importance of student engagement and how to engage students may result in teachers implementing practices that increase K-2 student engagement in learning, which can in turn lead to academic success. Another delimitation is that I only focused on Grades K-2 as my area of concentration in education is early childhood. Due to these delimitations the results of this study may have limited transferability. According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), transferability occurs when readers of a study recognize the details in the study that they can apply in their own contexts. I incorporated rich, thick descriptions of the data collected from K-2 teachers who teach students enrolled in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States and have 3 or more years of teaching experience, which may allow for transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Limitations

There are three potential challenges which may have limited this study as follows: teacher overload, researcher bias, and COVID-19 restrictions. First, it was difficult to identify K-2 teachers to participate and to isolate interview times due to busy teacher schedules. I used social media and the Walden University research participant pool with a snowballing strategy as necessary to recruit 15 volunteer participants who met the criteria of being current K-2 teachers with a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience in rural schools located in the southern region of United States. The second limitation was personal bias. A researcher's past experiences, biases, and outlook on a topic can affect the perspective through which a researcher approaches a study (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, I needed to be mindful about maintaining neutral positionality in relationship to my personal viewpoints within early childhood education (see Moustakas, 1994). I used a reflective journal to monitor my biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Finally, continued COVID-19 restrictions that include mask mandates, social distancing, and in person meeting limitations did affect data collection methods. To address this potential limitation, I recruited participants through email and conducted 45-60 minute digitally recorded virtual interviews on Zoom.

Significance

This study may be significant because it addressed the low levels of student engagement in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States and beyond. Related studies have recommended further research to explore teacher practices, student engagement, and academic achievement (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Hojnoski et

al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2019). In the local setting that prompted my interest in conducting this study, K-2 students have exhibited low levels of engagement over the previous 3 years, which has resulted in students' low levels of academic achievement (Faculty meeting minutes, March 23, 2021; State Department of Education, 2022). Moreover, during the 2020-2021 academic year, K-2 students demonstrated a lack of engagement and low levels of academic achievement in their virtual and traditional classrooms has been a concern as documented in faculty meeting minutes. According to Axelson and Flick (2011), student engagement can be described as the level to which students are actively involved in learning activities, classroom interactions, and their own learning. When students are engaged in learning, they display motivation to learn, exhibit on-task behaviors, interact appropriately with peers and adults, and persist in learning (Estévez, et al., 2021; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). On the other hand, disengaged students suffer from a lack of motivation and exhibit off-task behaviors which may result in reduced academic success and retention of material (Bakhshaee & Hejai, 2017; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). Disengaged students also demonstrate a lack of interaction with teachers and other students and an indifference towards school and learning activities (Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). Understanding student engagement is important. Bakhshaee and Hejazi (2017) explained that student academic learning and success directly relates to how actively engaged they are in school. However, student disengagement negatively affects academic achievement in young students and may create a long-term cycle of school related problems (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017). Stakeholders for this study include students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The

findings may benefit all involved due to increased academic success, a more positive outlook on school and learning, and stronger relationships between students and teachers. Potential implications for positive social change include increased teacher awareness and understanding about student engagement in learning, which may help teachers improve student learning, academic success, and dispositions about school.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I described a basic qualitative study with interviews intended to explore how K-2 teachers promote students' engagement in learning. The conceptual framework, based on a combination of Bruner's constructivist theory and Keller's ARCS model, guided the research questions, methodology, and data collection and analysis. Chapter 1 provided an overview of this study including the problem, purpose, research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, and definitions of key terms. This chapter also highlighted the related assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. In Chapter 2, I provide an exhaustive review of existing research on this topic and identify the existing gap in practice. Researchers have indicated that further research on primary grade teacher practices that engage K-2 learners for positive student outcomes is needed (Estévez et al., 2021; Fifolt & Morgan, 2019; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). However, teachers at the local primary school located in the southern region of the United States indicated they struggle to do so (Faculty meeting Minutes, March 2021, May 2021, October 2021). As such, this study is needed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This basic qualitative study with interviews sought to address the local problem of low levels of student engagement in learning exhibited by K-2 students in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. The purpose of this study was to explore how K-2 teachers promote student engagement in learning. There are many researchers who have identified the vital part that engagement plays in early childhood educational settings and how it affects academic success (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Estévez et al., 2021; Kurt & Sezek, 2021; Pedler et at., 2020). Researchers have also indicated that additional studies are needed to explore how teachers address this problem (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Cochoran et al., 2017; Hojnoski et al., 2020; Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Zhao et al., 2019). In Chapter 2, I justify the use of constructivism and the ARCS model as the conceptual framework for this study. I also present a review of literature relating to student engagement in K-2 settings in the United States and abroad. My examination focused on gaining a deeper understanding of the student engagement phenomena and isolating any existing gaps in current research. The literature review was designed to ensure that previous literature and topics relating to student engagement in early childhood settings is thoroughly presented. Major sections in this chapter include a summation of the current literature that establishes the relevance of the problem, the literature search strategy, conceptual framework, and a literature review of key terms and concepts.

Literature Search Strategy

An extensive search of existing literature was conducted over the course of many months. According to Randolph (2009), conducting a literature review provides a researcher with relevant knowledge regarding the chosen topic, including key terms, concepts, and theories. It is also a method of demonstrating the researcher's knowledge about the topic and helps to isolate what research has already been conducted and what still needs to be further investigated (Randolph, 2009). I met with a Walden Librarian who provided me with additional methods for isolated related terms and valuable resources. Research for this study was obtained from several databases including Education Source, ERIC, Sage, EBSCOhost, Walden Library, APA PsycInfo, Academic Search Complete, and Google Scholar.

The following key terms were used in isolation and in varied groupings to gain a thorough and comprehensive search of related literature: *student engagement, the three types of student engagement, measuring student engagement, the relationship between engagement* and *academic success, motivation, teaching strategies, hands on learning, experiential learning, project-based learning,* and *student engagement in specific subject areas.* These terms are also associated with this study: *peer instruction, multiple intelligence, combined method, children's interests, curriculum, outcomes, research design, school culture, teacher performance, learning styles, self-determination theory, autonomy, integrated learning, habits of mind, teacher's beliefs, cooperative learning, teacher effectiveness, active learning, social skills,* and *professional development*. Key terms were selected that relate to all aspects of engagement, including hands on and

problem based learning, as well as STEM and STEAM as they all are frequently used as an effort to increase student involvement in learning. A spreadsheet was created to organize search terms and multiple variations of key term combinations were used.

Conceptual Framework

The concept upon which this study was based is how K-2 teachers address the low levels of student engagement in learning, both at a local rural school in the southern region of the United States and throughout the nation. The framework that guided this basic qualitative study is centered around the constructivist theory proposed by Bruner (1966) and the attention, relevance, confidence, satisfaction (ARCS) model developed by Keller (1979). These elements framed the research questions because they are based upon the fundamentals of child development, the theory of motivation, and how children best learn. I reviewed the constructivist theory of Bruner and the ARCS theory of motivation. The conceptual framework was applied to explain the concepts of student engagement and guide the interview questions to address the local problem and provide clarity regarding the purpose of the study. The conceptual framework helped to guide the data analysis process.

Constructivist Theory

In his seminal work titled *Toward a Theory of Instruction*, Bruner (1966) proposed a constructivist theory that has been embraced by educators for decades. Bruner recommended the use of active, scaffolded teaching practices for all students to promote critical thinking, which Bruner believed resulted in increased student engagement and learning. Bruner's constructivist theory proposes incorporating active instructional

practices to promote critical thinking and providing students with a framework about how children best learn, grow, and develop (Bruner, 1966). In an earlier work, Bruner (1960) suggested, when students are presented with new concepts, that teachers should follow a progression from action based learning, to image based knowledge, and then to symbolic representation of the content or concepts being learned. Bruner called for teachers to organize the sequence of learning and instructional materials if they are to promote student understanding. Bruner's theory of constructivism suggested that learning is most effective when it is active, so the learner is able to construct concepts based on previous knowledge.

ARCS Model

The ARCS model aligns with Bruner's constructivist theory and provides a clear understanding of how student motivation and their increased confidence correlates with children's engagement (Keller, 1987). The ARCS model emphasizes three priorities that teachers should follow when designing instructional activities. Following the ARCS model, researchers suggested teachers consider the following: (a) using a child's perspective, (b) incorporating active learning, (c) promoting problem solving (1987). The link between the ARCS model and my study is the specific concentration on strategies teachers use to engage K-2 students in learning.

Combined Bruner and Keller Framework

Bruner's constructivist theory and Keller's ARCS model were combined to create a conceptual framework that framed my research problem, purpose, and methodological decisions. I was able to address my research questions by creating interview questions

that were guided by the conceptual framework. The logical connections between the ARCS model (attention, relevance, confidence, satisfaction) and Bruner's constructivist theory (active instructional practices, critical thinking strategies, engaged learning framework) provided a guideline to follow when conducting interviews and collecting and analyzing data. My combined framework was used as a foundation upon which to base this study's basic qualitative methodology with interviews for data collection. Data analysis, following the collection of data, began with a priori codes from Keller's ARCS model and Bruner's constructivist theory. The alignment of the research questions, the interview questions, and the conceptual framework was guided by the ARCS model developed by Keller and the constructivist theory founded by Bruner (see Appendix A).

Previous Research

Bruner's constructivist theory has been applied in numerous studies conducted outside of the United States and in higher education in the United States. Few studies have focused on Bruner's theory with students at the K-2 levels. Takaya (2008) examined Bruner's theory and suggested that it offers insight and guidance on children's development, motivation, and learning. Bruner was a proponent of discovery learning and believed in and proposed three approaches for gaining knowledge: enactive or action-based representation, iconic or image-based representation, and symbolic or language-based representation (Takaya, 2008). DeJarnette (2018) investigated K-2 integrated science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) curriculum based on the Bruner's constructivist approach and sociocultural theory. The framework supporting this study proposed that children gain knowledge through interacting with their environment

and with others which increases their critical thinking skills, motivation, and engagement in learning. DeJarnette found that teachers gain confidence and proficiency in implementing STEAM curriculum when they increase student engagement in problem solving skills and collaboration. Julià and Antolí (2019) based their study on the ARCS Model as a conceptual framework when investigating long-term STEM based active learning and students' motivation to learn the curriculum. The ARCs model is comprised of four motivational factors that include confidence, relevance, satisfaction, and attention. Researchers found differences in students' motivations to engage in STEM over time, with significant increases in motivation from the first to the third terms for students taking the course (Julià & Antolí, 2019). The concepts presented in constructivism and the ARCs model are related to the research problem of low student engagement, which is explored in this study by looking specifically at how teachers engage students in learning. These two concepts offer a conceptual framework that may guide teachers in discussing their practices to address the research questions.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

In this section, I review the gap in the literature regarding student engagement in learning and how teachers engage early childhood students in learning. I synthesize information derived from current peer-reviewed, academic journals and studies related to student engagement during early childhood, specifically with engagement by primary grade students and teacher practices that engage K-2 students. I will also identify numerous related terms and concepts, as well the need for this study by identifying gaps in practice. This review begins with a detailed description of student engagement,

including the three domains, how it effects academic success, and results from previous studies relating to engagement. Although the review focuses on student engagement, related concepts such as motivation, hands on learning, and specific instructional practices are also examined. Additionally, an examination of student engagement within each of the primary subject areas will provides a comprehensive outlook of curricula within K-2 self-contained classrooms. Literature describing how teacher and peer relationships affect academic motivation is reviewed along with literature highlighting related theories on child development and classroom teaching strategies. Literature reviewed in this section are related to the qualitative methodology and scope of interest.

Student Engagement

Research on student engagement has proliferated in recent years due to an increase in awareness on the effect that engagement has on student learning and academic outcomes (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Estévez, et al., 2021; Kurt & Sezek, 2021; Pedler, et at., 2020). However, recommendations for further research on how to increase students' engagement in learning is found in current and seminal literature. Few studies focused specifically on teachers' perspectives on how to improve and sustain student engagement (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Cochoran et al., 2017; Hojnoski et al., 2020; Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Zhao et al., 2019). Several studies on student engagement revealed that when students are engaged in learning, they display motivation to learn, exhibit on-task behaviors, interact appropriately with peers and adults, and persist in learning (Estévez, et al., 2021; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). Bakhshaee and Hejazi (2017) explained there is a relationship between students' academic engagement and their

academic success, and suggested further investigation is needed to understand what methods can be implemented to increase student engagement. Zhao et al. (2019) investigated how teachers support children's engagement in learning and recommended additional research is needed in three areas of student engagement: (a) how student engagement is impacted over time, (b) a measure of increased academic success linked to increased engagement in learning, and (c) how factors in the school and at home affect student engagement. Hojnoski et al. (2020) sought to identify methods of measuring student engagement that promoted students' school success during their early years and recommend further research on measuring student engagement leading to their academic achievement that includes a range of students' ages in a variety of settings. Cochran et al. (2017) investigated student engagement at the elementary level, including primary grade students, and found students in learner-centered classrooms exhibited more motivation and engagement in learning activities. Findings from this study indicated that K-2 students in learner-centered classrooms exhibit more student power, motivation, and engagement (Cochran, et al., 2017). These researchers recommended further studies to identify specific methods to motivate students to promote learning (Cochran et al., 2017).

In seminal research by Ladd and Dinella (2009), researchers found that students who consistently demonstrated low levels of engagement during their early childhood years had difficulty in achieving long-term academic success. These researchers highlighted the need for further research to investigate methods for improving student engagement at the elementary level, which includes Grades K-2 (Ladd & Dinella, 2009). Näkk and Timoštšuk (2019) concluded that engagement is associated with positive

academic outcomes, including achievement in school and persistence in learning activities. Additionally, the researchers explained that engagement at the early childhood education level (prekindergarten through grade three) is vital as it is a predictor of school retention (Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019).

Bae et al. (2020) examined student characteristics including gender, grade, and socioeconomic status and the correlation to student engagement and academic achievement among elementary students. The study results indicated that student engagement has a direct impact on academic achievement across all demographics (Bae et al., 2020). The authors suggested future research should include additional efforts to provide insight into student disengagement such as contextual and individual predictors as well as alter research methods, such as the interviewer and interview strategies (Bae et al., 2020). Student engagement has far reaching implications for student learning which includes memory and retaining information learned, student academic success, outlook towards learning and school, and relationships (Cochran et al., 2017; Fifolt & Morgan, 2019; Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019). Researchers suggested that with proper support, interventions, and instructional strategies, student motivation and engagement can be greatly improved (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Fifolt & Morgan, 2019; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). Estévez et al. (2021) concurred and suggested that engagement is directly related to academic achievement, and there is a need for an amalgamated related framework. Further research on student engagement is needed to ascertain specific methods to reduce disengaged behavior that affects students' success in school.

Three Types of Student Engagement

There are many components to student engagement. This term may refer to one's willingness to ask questions, complete tasks or attempt challenging tasks, build relationships, or general demeanor regarding school and learning. Näkk and Timoštšuk (2019) divide engagement into three domains: cognitive, and emotional engagement. It is important to address each aspect when considering methods to increase engagement. Cognitive engagement can be described as the intellectual involvement in learning, willingness to accept challenges, and problem solving strategies (Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019). Ideal cognitive engagement would include paying attention to instruction, asking questions, and putting forth more effort than is required (Gou et al., 2018). Li et al. (2021) explored how cognitive engagement affected student performance levels and concluded that those who performed at a higher rate demonstrated a significantly higher level of cognitive engagement than those with reduced school success. Behavioral engagement refers to time on-task, class participation, and willingness to ask questions and help if needed (Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019). More specifically, students would be on time, turn in their work, and be prepared for class. They would also participate in class discussions, put forth best effort, and wish to please their teachers. Hoang et al. (2019) conducted a study with 1315 kindergarten students to explore engagement in classroom settings. They found that students who exhibited higher behavioral engagement participated more in learning activities, stayed on task, and were more inclined to follow the rules or directions given (Hoang et al., 2019). Emotional engagement refers to students' feeling regarding learning and class activities (Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019).

Students with positive levels of emotional engagement look forward to going to school, get excited about learning, and build strong relationship with teachers and peers. Hoang et al. (2019) explained that emotional engagement refers to the feelings or reactions of students, and found those who are more emotionally engaged, are also more curious and involved in learning. According to Gou et al. (2018) and Näkk and Timoštšuk (2019), the various components of student engagement must be considered with efforts in improving student engagement. Additionally, the authors recommend additional research in the three components of student engagement, as well as specific methods in improving engagement in each domain (Gou et al., 2018; Hoang et al., 2019; Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019).

Measuring Student Engagement

Hojnoski et al. (2020) sought to identify and isolate an effective measurement of student engagement in an effort to shed light upon efforts intended to promote school success in the early years. The authors explained that the results indicated a positive correlation between student engagement and students' perspectives on support in school (Hojnoski et al., 2020). Bohlmann et al. (2019) explored the effectiveness of an observation tool that assesses children's engagement called the Individualized Classroom Assessment System (inCLASS). The tool was designed to provide insight on children's engagement in early education classrooms and their interactions with teachers and peers. The findings support that the inCLASS provides consistent measurement among varied student demographics, which indicates strong validity (Bohlmann et al., 2019). Additionally, findings illustrate the value of the inCLASS as an observation tool in

exploring children's school experiences and how these relate to socio-emotional wellbeing, school readiness, school engagement, and academic success (Bohlmann et al., 2019).

Relationship Between Engagement and Academic Achievement

Bakhshaee and Hejazi (2017) explained that academic success directly relates to how actively engaged students are in school. Student disengagement negatively affects learning and development in young students and may create a long term cycle of school related problems (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017). Pedler et al. (2020) concurred that student disengagement is an educational crisis that is greatly impacting students' academic achievement on an international level. The authors report that students who are disengaged can lose as much as seven months equivalent of learning and development (Pedler et al., 2020). Fifolt and Morgan (2019) also explained that student disengagement is a severe concern facing the American education system and one that can have serious and long-lasting effects on students' success in school. These authors also suggested that student engagement can be improved with effective instructional strategies and support (Fifolt & Morgan, 2019). Pedler et al. and Hojnoski et al. (2020) recommended further research is needed to explore the links between students' engagement and their academic achievement, as well as methods teachers used to increase student engagement.

Student Disengagement

Saripah and Widiastuti (2019) described student disengagement as students' exhibiting behaviors unrelated to or inappropriate for the learning environment. When students are not engaged, they suffer from a lack of motivation and exhibit off-task

behaviors, which may result in reduced academic success and retention of material (Bakhshaee & Hejai, 2017; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). Pedler et al. (2020) concurred with these findings and reported that disengagement results in a significant and lasting deficit in learning and development. Bakhshaee and Hejazi (2017) explained that a student's academic learning and success directly relates to how actively engaged they are at school. Student disengagement negatively affects academic achievement in young students and may create a long-term cycle of school related problems (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017). Disengaged students also demonstrate a lack of interaction with educators and other students and an indifference towards school and learning activities (Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019).

Saripah and Widiastuti (2019) explored the profile of off-task behavior and the relationship between the effects of off-task behavior on the development of primary school age children. They examined the frequency and effects of off-task behavior to decrease the occurrence of these behaviors and engage students in learning (Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). The research results showed that 60% of the students who exhibited off-task behavior were in the moderate level, and that such behavior did have a negative effect on the learning process and students' development (Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). These researchers recommended additional studies that incorporate other factors that can affect off-task behavior, including teaching and parenting methods, as well as increasing the sample size to gain a larger representative of student behavior (Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). Olivier et al. (2020) concluded that students with externalization or internalization behaviors have a higher rate of underachievement in school that can be contributed to

disengagement in school. These studies help to illustrate not only how student disengagement negatively affects academic achievement, but also the need to isolate methods to increase engagement at primary grade levels (Bakhshaee & Hejai, 2017; Olivier et al., 2020; Pedler et al., 2020; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019).

Student Interest

Hedges (2021) interviewed young adults to explore the relationship between their interests as children and the result of those interests in their lives to date. The study results showed that self-interests affected achievement, motivation, and satisfaction in participants' lives and led to a range of outcomes (Hedges, 2021). The author suggested that early childhood education environments should include a broad range of children's interests and potential career outcomes to provide an engaging, motivating learning environment (Hedges, 2021). Cochran et al. (2017) sought to identify and describe how the inclusion of specific classroom procedures including the use of questioning, student choice, authentic discussion, and student feedback affected student engagement in elementary classrooms. The findings indicated that students in learner centered classrooms exhibit more student power, motivation, and engagement (Cochran, et al., 2017). Hedges (2021) additionally recommended future studies to explore the connection between early childhood experiences and related life outcomes. Cochran et al. (2017) recommend future studies to identify teaching practices that encourage student engagement and student learning, as well as using the related data to provide specific recommendations for pre-service teacher and educational researchers, such as the use of

questioning strategies (Vezzani, 2019). Cochran et al. also concluded that students in learner-centered classrooms exhibited more student power, motivation, and engagement.

Student Motivation and Demotivation

Mantzicopoulos et al. (2018) suggested that motivation increases students' persistence in learning activities. According to several researchers, motivation also increases students' time on task and is an important factor in learning and school achievement (Aelterman et al., 2019; Cents-Boonstra et al., 2020; Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019; Mantzicopoulos et al., 2018). Mantzicopoulos et al. investigated student achievement measured by observational indicators. This researcher found a definitive positive relationship between motivation and student achievement and deemed that student motivation played an equally vital part in student achievement (Mantzicopoulos et al., 2018). Mantzicopoulos et al. recommended future studies that further investigate the measures used to evaluate teachers' effectiveness and other motivational strategies. Näkk and Timoštšuk (2019) also found that fostering students' autonomy and self-regulation skills, relatedness, and competence resulted in their increased engagement, academic success, and self-regulation skills. Learning engagement is vital in classroom settings as it determines students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional investments (Naak & Timoštšuk, 2019).

Teacher Motivating Style

Many prior studies have focused on how student-teacher relationships and instructional styles effect student motivation and engagement (Aelterman et al., 2019; Cents-Boonstra et al., 2020; Haerens et al., 2018; Matos et al., 2018). Aelterman et al.

(2019) investigated how teachers' motivating style affected students' motivation and demotivation. Researchers used four primary measures that included support, structure, control, and chaos, and eight subcategories to measure student outcomes (Aelterman et al., 2019). Key findings of this research identified a positive relationship that made a difference in student learning between the four primary measures and eight subcategories and student motivation (Aelterman et al., 2019). Aelterman et al. recommended future studies that further examined the subcategories, the effects of a more person-centered teaching approach, and how gradual changes in teaching styles affect students' levels of intrinsic motivation (Aelterman et al., 2019). Cents-Boonstra et al. (2020) also recommended future studies that focus specifically on teacher behaviors and motivational strategies and how these factors affect student motivation and success.

Haerens et al. (2018) examined how educators' perceived level of support and control toward students affected their intrinsic motivation and level of school success. Researchers found that teachers who demonstrated high levels of perceived support and low sense of control over students made a substantially higher positive effect on students' motivation and school success than those with low levels of perceived support and high sense of control over students (Haerens et al., 2018). Matos et al. (2018) explored students' engagement in comparison to teachers' motivating styles. One key implication of the study found that a perceived high level of educator support and positive interactions had a direct impact on student engagement and motivation (Matos et al., 2018). These researchers recommended further research with a greater and varied sample size to gain a deeper understanding from different aspects (Matos et al., 2018). Haerens et

al. suggested future studies that focus on observing various styles of teachers' motivational abilities as well as exploring the success of intervention programs and their influence on students' motivational levels.

Teacher Instructional Strategies, Approaches, and Learning Activities

There are infinite styles and approaches used by teachers. How students perceive and react to them has a profound effect on their engagement and overall educational experience (Kurt & Sezek, 2021; Muñoz-García & Villena-Martínez, 2021; Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019). Kurt and Sezek (2021) examined the effects of different teaching approaches on student engagement in science classes. These researchers found statistical differences in student engagement and scientific process skills in groups where peer instruction and combined methods were used (Kurt & Sezek, 2021). Results also indicated an increase in students' engagement when problem based learning and combined methods were used in the instructional delivery (Kurt & Sezek, 2021). Researchers recommend further studies in which combined teaching methods are utilized for all the observed lessons taught (Kurt & Sezek, 2021). Pedler et al. (2020) explored the effects of a multidimensional instructional design on student engagement. The researchers suggested that the three dimensions include the following: (a) behavioral engagement focused on student participation, effort, attention, and willingness to ask questions and follow rules; (b) emotional engagement which incorporates affective reactions such as anxiety, boredom, and general like or dislike of school; and, (c) cognitive engagement which includes motivational elements such as self-regulation, willingness to work hard, challenge oneself, and master new skills (Pedler et al., 2020).

Researchers suggested that there exists a direct connection between instructional methods and student engagement (Pedler et al., 2020). Pedler et al. recognized that teachers need to address all three dimensions in their efforts to increase student engagement in the classroom. These researchers recommend future studies that implement the three-dimensional model to gauge its effectiveness on increasing student engagement, as well as further investigation into teachers' outlook on student engagement (Pedler et al., 2020).

Aelterman et al. (2019) also investigated how teaching styles affected students' success in school. Their findings identified a positive relationship between teacher support, structure, control, and chaos on student engagement and overall academic achievement with students aged 6-12 years (Aelterman et al., 2019). Kennedy (2018) also found a significant relationship between student reading engagement and motivation and teacher instructional styles and interventions they teachers used.

Reddy et al. (2021) investigated the effectiveness of the Classroom Strategies Coaching Model (CSC) in elementary schools serving low-income populations. The CSC Model consists of observations of teachers' instructional and behavioral management strategies and measured the use of evidence-based teaching practices, student engagement, and teacher ratings of student academic performance, behavior, and support (Reddy et al., 2021). These researchers found that teachers participating in the CSC model demonstrated higher frequency of positive student feedback, improvements in quality of instruction and behavior management strategies, and increased student academic engagement (Reddy et al., 2021). Näkk and Timoštšuk (2019) explored the

relationship between teaching practices and student engagement over a two-year period. These researchers found a direct relationship between student engagement in learning and classroom variables, teaching strategies, and students' interactions between and among peers and teachers (Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019). Muñoz-García and Villena-Martínez (2021) also investigated the relationships between and among student engagement, approaches to learning, and satisfaction with learning and sustainable behaviors. These researchers reported that results of their study illustrated a positive relationship between learning engagement with strategic approaches and positive environmental behavior; and recommended future studies that include larger sample size with balanced gender, and the inclusion of primary (Muñoz-García & Villena-Martínez, 2021). Reddy et al. (2021) recommended further investigation using instructional practices relating to the CSC model in varied regions and school settings, as well as into teacher and student outcomes using the model long term and in different environments. Näkk and Timoštšuk (2019) also recommended future studies to further investigate how teaching strategies affect classroom variables, with larger sample sizes, other student grades, and with varied data collection methods.

A study by Shaw (2019) focused on how meaningful engagement with young children positively influenced early childhood learning environments and teaching practices. Shaw found that there are many factors relating to teachers' willingness to engage with young children's opinions and voices. These included a teacher's ability to positively interact with children individually, children's abilities to express themselves, and expectations within schools and the support provided by school personnel (Shaw,

2019). Christopher and Farran (2020) investigated the effects of eight classroom strategies on K students' academic achievement. These practices were previously found to be effective with prekindergarten (PK) students in math, language, and self-regulation (Christopher & Farran, 2020). Students were observed and assessments were administered at the beginning and end of the academic year (Christopher & Farran, 2020). The findings indicated that many of the classroom practices investigated made a significant impact on children's success both in PK and in K, with the most impactful being students' engagement and involvement in learning activities (Christopher & Farran, 2020). The study also showed that students responded more positively to teachers when the interaction was more dynamic and supportive (Christopher & Farran, 2020). Shaw stressed the importance of educators listening to students' interests and opinions to improve not only the student to teacher relationship, but the general quality of education as well. Christopher & Farran (2020) recommend future studies to include other classroom practices, and with other age groups, using varied observational practices and data collection tools.

Tsai et al. (2021) investigated how student's perceived levels of engagement related to specific learning activities in online courses. The researchers used eight factors to determine learning engagement and concluded that a person-centered approach and interactions that included the instructor and other students resulted in greater learning outcomes (Tsai et al., 2021). Estévez et al. (2021) explored how various characteristics relate to and effect self-regulation and academic performance. The results indicated that students with higher levels of cognitive engagement also demonstrated stronger time

management and self-regulatory skills, as well as more positive school interactions with adults (Estévez et al., 2021). There were also positive correlations between emotional engagement and academic achievement (Estévez et al., 2021). Tsai et al. (2021) recommended future studies that expand on these findings to evaluate the impacts of instructional context using a different sample or a different set of course activities, while Estévez et al. recommended broadening research results to other academic subjects.

Anthony et al., (2021) explored limitations of previous studies on academic enablers and achievement to investigate the effect of interpersonal skills, engagement, motivation, and study skills on students' academic achievement. Academic enablers can be described as variables that contribute to the overall educational experience of students in their relationships with peers, teachers, and leaders (Anthony et al., 2021). The researchers looked at students' academic achievement and relationships among variables and achievement over time as students progressed from grade to grade (Anthony et al., 2021). They identified greater differences in variables when comparing relationships and academic achievement and interrelations among grade levels (Anthony et al., 2021). The findings also show a pattern of reduced academic enablers among older elementary students, specifically with study skills (Anthony et al., 2021). These key findings relate to addressing the three styles of engagement as described by Näkk and Timoštšuk (2019) and the effects of instructional support on student engagement (Cochran et al., 2017). Vezzani (2019) investigated the impact of valuable and well-planned conversations in early childhood education, specifically the situations in which students are most engaged and involved during a learning activity. Vezzani reported that young children's

engagement is increased with open and authentic questioning practices and suggested future research on questioning practices in early childhood settings and the relationship to student engagement. Anthony et al. recommended that further research is needed to investigate links among social and emotional learning and academic achievement. Various researchers concluded that factors that had positive effects on student engagement included teacher interventions based on behavioral learning theories, effective classroom management practices, and self-management strategies (Anthony et al., 2021; Christopher & Farran, 2020; Estévez et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2021; Vezzani, 2019). Many recommendations were made for future research that more thoroughly investigates factors relating to the effects of instructional practices on student engagement (Amtu et al., 2020; Kurt & Sezek, 2021; Muñoz-García & Villena-Martínez, 2021; Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019; Tsai et al., 2021).

Hands on Learning and Active Learning

Martella et al. (2020) found that students who were actively involved in learning activities experienced higher levels of understanding and retained more information compared to more traditional, explicit forms of instruction. These researchers used a procedure commonly known as the control of variables strategy (CVS) to investigate the effectiveness of four instructional components on students' active learning as measured by pre and post assessments (Martella et al., 2020). Researchers explained that results showed increased levels of CVS knowledge with the hands on learning activities compared to the passive learning activities (Martella et al., 2020). Ekwueme et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between activity oriented (hands on) methods of teaching

and student engagement. These researchers found that activity oriented teaching strategies directly correlate with student understanding and result in higher student success (Ekwueme et al., 2015). Bartholomew et al. (2018) explored how physical activity within academic lessons affected students' learning and engagement. Students' time on task and active learning engagement were measured during two groups: conventional and sedentary, or hands on and activity based academic lessons (Bartholomew et al., 2018). Researchers found that when lessons incorporated physical movement and hands on activities, students were more engaged and demonstrated increased levels of time on task (Bartholomew et al., 2018). Students assigned to the group taught by traditional, sedentary methods demonstrated a decreased level of time on task and were less engaged in their learning (Bartholomew et al., 2018). Ling and Hamzaid (2019) studied parents' perspectives on the 3H's educational model that incorporated a whole child philosophy in early childhood settings. The 3H's education prototype consists of multiple areas of children's developmental domains including cognitive, physical, social, affective skills, and language (Ling & Hamzaid, 2019). Data were collected from parent interviews to obtain a deeper understanding of parents' viewpoints regarding the 3H's model (Ling & Hamzaid, 2019). Study results indicated that parents were highly supported the hands on and activity-based learning strategies, and felt these strategies increased their children's learning and knowledge and promoted engagement in learning (Ling & Hamzaid, 2019). Bartholomew et al. (2018) concur, and suggested that movement, physical activity, and hands on learning can have a positive impact on student academic success. Martella et al. recommended further research

exploring the use of different variables such as student skill level, gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status; as well as additional studies that focus more on instructional strategies and teacher support rather than on student behaviors. Ekwueme et al. (2015) recommended further research including investigation of activity oriented teaching strategies and exploration into how to gain administrative support and encourage teachers to implement this approach.

Project Based Learning

Culclasure et al. (2019) described project based learning as an instructional model that incorporates 21st century skills with critical problem solving skills to promote academic, behavioral, and social emotional development. These researchers also explain that the project-based learning model is increasing in popularity nationwide because it is considered more engaging for students than more traditional teaching methods (Culclasure et al., 2019). Kurt and Sezek (2021) and Amtu et al. (2020) explored the relationships between specific instructional methods and student engagement and found that problem based learning, along with educator support, showed a direct effect on student engagement and deeper levels of understanding in early childhood educational settings. Culclasure et al. (2019) concluded that project based learning and related implementation methods influenced teachers' and students' love of learning. Data were collected from teacher and student surveys, classroom observations, and an analysis of behavioral and academic outcomes (Culclasure et al., 2019). Study results showed that students who participated in project-based learning demonstrated enhanced social emotional and problem solving skills (Culclasure et al., 2019). Habib et al. (2021)

explored the benefits of teachers utilizing a student-centered learning approach that centered hands on, collaborative, project-based learning using experimental content designed in a laboratory. Results indicated that the inclusion of the project-based learning led to increased learning through student interactions and inquiries (Habib et al., 2021). Lazic et al. (2021) explored how the implementation of project-based learning in lower elementary math classes effected student achievement. Study findings indicated that this instructional method was beneficial in students gaining a deeper understanding of math concepts and demonstrated increased engagement in these lessons compared to traditional models (Lazic et al., 2021).

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning refers to the process of learning from experiences and this theory of reflection has been divided into four stages: concrete experience for the "doing" phase, reflective observation for thinking stage, abstract conceptualization for the concluding stage, and active experimentation for the adapting stage (Alvi & Gillies, 2021; Kolb, 1984). According to Matriano (2020), experiential learning refers to the information obtained from one's experiences and is a vital element in learning and development, retaining information, and how engaged students are with their educational environment. Habib et al. (2021) acknowledged that the concept of experiential learning is gaining popularity in recent years. This is due in part to the inclusion of creativity and problem solving skills, which Habib et al. identified as having been previously disregarded in many learning methodologies. Alvi and Gillies (2021) explored the effects of experiential learning methods on students' education in an effort to instill a sense of

self-regulation, responsibility, and love of learning. The researchers explored methods to promote self-regulated learning (SLR) in elementary classrooms and investigated teachers' outlooks and procedures of SRL through an experiential learning model (Alvi & Gillies, 2021). Data were collected from classroom observations and interviews and results confirmed that experiential learning and self-regulation are related, and the overall teaching experiential learning approach did have a direct influence on self-regulated learning (Alvi & Gillies, 2021). Alvi and Gillies also found that self-regulated learning used in conjunction with experiential learning resulted in greater outcomes. The connections between SRL and experiential learning include more engaged and active learning, a connection with real life experiences, increased motivation, critical thinking, and problem solving skills (Alvi & Gillies, 2021). Matriano (2020) believed that experiential learning is a vital element in learning and development. Matriano evaluated the efficacy of the exploration, research, interaction, and creation (ERIC) learning model, which is based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. Data were collected from several sources pre and posttests, observations, interviews, and surveys (Matriano, 2020). Matriano found there was a substantial increase in student performance and positivity toward learning when the ERIC model was included with experiential learning instructional methods. Habib et al. (2021) recommended future studies that investigate the long-term effects of experiential learning as well remote integration of the experimental model to support remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Alvi and Gillies (2021) recommended three areas for future studies, as follows: (a) to investigate additional underlying sources of self-regulation and responsibility for

learning; (b) to identify the fundamental connection between self-regulated learning and experiential learning; and (c) to explore the teacher's role in promoting SRL.

Content Areas

Teachers at the K-2 level traditionally teach in self-contained classrooms and are responsible for teaching all content areas including reading, math, and science (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2022). Therefore, each of these main categories will be explored. In order for students to achieve comprehensive academic success, they must be actively engaged in learning throughout the day and in each subject area (Estévez, et al., 2021; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019).

Reading

Reading instruction is the most fundamental aspect of early childhood education, as reading is the basis for learning about all other content areas (Erickson & Wharton, 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2019). Erickson and Wharton (2019) investigated how classroom environments and teaching strategies can influence students' autonomous motivation in reading. The researchers describe the psychological and academic benefits of the intrinsic desire to succeed in school without the need for external rewards and explored teaching strategies that would help develop these traits (Erickson & Wharton, 2019). Erickson and Wharton (2019) explored how teachers could assist in encouraging self-motivation with literacy-based activities and skills. Zhao et al. (2019) explored the impact teacher support makes on student reading engagement and the variables between the factors. Participants included 776 third through sixth grade students in China (Zhao et al., 2019). Research tools included a reading interest inventory, an academic self-concept

and reading engagement scale, and the teachers' perception of support scale reading engagement scale (Zhao et al., 2019).

Erickson and Wharton found that when students are offered choices in learning activities or outcomes, they exhibit higher level of intrinsic motivation (Erickson & Wharton, 2019). Additionally, the researchers found that support from teachers, family, and peers also had a positive effect on the desire to succeed in literacy-based activities and skills (Erickson &Wharton, 2019). Similarly, Zhao et al. (2019) found a positive relationship between teacher support and students' reading engagement. The results also indicate that reading interest was related to reading engagement and teacher support and reading engagement, but the Chinese academic self-concept was not directly affected by the other factors (Zhao et al., 2019).

Markušic and Sabljic (2019) acknowledged potential limitations of traditional teaching methods typically used in teaching literature and sought to explore a more problem based, creative teaching methodology. According to Markušic and Sabljic, using a problem based approach to teaching literature is more engaging to students, and actively involves them in the learning process. Data were collected from surveys completed by the 50 Croatian teacher participants and the results show students were, in fact, more engaged and motivated in the problem based lessons compared to the traditional lectures (Markušic &Sabljic, 2019). Additionally, students involved in the problem based lessons showed increased independence, critical thinking, and creativity (Markušic & Sabljic, 2019). Kennedy (2018) researched how the problem based Write to Read program impacted student literacy skills in disadvantaged schools. These findings

also suggested that the Write to Read instructional interventions had a substantial impact on student reading engagement and motivation (Kennedy, 2018). Kim et al. (2021) explored how the implementation of the Model of Reading Engagement (MORE) program affected first grade students' reading comprehension and engagement. The MORE intervention utilized content literacy instruction to improve the effectiveness of literacy instruction (Kim et al., 2021). The results showed the intervention had a significant and positive effect on student reading comprehension and engagement (Kim et al., 2021).

Zhao et al. (2019) recommended further research to explore grade level variations of student reading engagement, as well as explore how students' reading interest, need for support, and reading engagement alter over time. These researchers also suggested that future studies investigate the effect of the parental support, home environment, and other factors have on reading engagement. Erickson and Wharton (2019) recommended further research that includes investigations into specific methods for motivating students in reading as well as other subject areas.

Math

Student engagement in math lessons plays a vital role in student understanding, academic achievement in math, and positivity toward math classes and concepts (Irvine, 2020; Lazic, et al., 2021; Yanfei Yang, et al., 2021). Irvine (2020) conducted a study to explore the outcomes of a classroom intervention which incorporated hands on activities, real-world connections, active student involvement, cooperative learning, and use of manipulatives and technology on student engagement and outlooks. The study was based

on the belief that engagement and student views towards math are vital components of learning (Irvine, 2020). Irvine (2020) explored whether explicit teaching methods would have a positive effect on student engagement, motivation, attitudes, and/or achievement in math (Irvine, 2020). The learning activities and instructional strategies used were intended to target student engagement and positively impact student attitude in math lessons (Irvine, 2020). Lazic et al. (2021) investigated how incorporating project-based learning in lower elementary math classes effected student understanding with mathematical concepts. The researchers reported increased engagement in math lessons, as well as in overall student success (Lazic et al., 2021). Irvine (2020) also reported positive effects for both students' level of engagement and mindset towards math and mathematical concepts. Yanfei Yang et al. (2021) explored how teacher-student interactions and emotional support effected student engagement and math performance. The study results indicated that in the classrooms where teachers developed positive relationship and students felt emotionally supported, they demonstrated increased engagement, self-efficacy, and math performance.

Science

Wines et al. (2018) acknowledge that science is a vital part of young children's education and that many teachers are not as confident teaching science as other subject area due to a lack of pedagogical knowledge. Duruk and Akgun (2020) also acknowledged the importance of pedagogical content knowledge and conducted a related study that investigated the experiences of a science teacher using the Real Engagement in Active Problem-Solving Model (REAPS). Gilbert et al. (2020) conducted a study based

on the concept that many teachers possess negative associations with teaching science and that these feelings can have a negative impact on teaching practices and student learning. Schmidt et al. (2018) investigated the relationship between student engagement and learning environments as well as methods to study engagement during science classes. Specifically, they examined how explicit learning activities and student choice affected student engagement (Schmidt et al., 2018). Schmidt et al. found that high levels of student engagement in science class were related to two factors: (a) the type of learning activities teachers used, and (b) providing students with choices. Wines et al. (2018) conducted a study based on the implementation and exploration of an instructional strategy designed to enhance and engage students in science lessons. The lessons were designed to incorporate problem solving skills, boost educators' confidence in teaching science, and to improve the level of student interest in science (Wines et al., 2018). The results indicate that students and teachers had positive reactions to the lessons, and both teacher confidence and student interest in science was increased (Wines et al., 2018). Duruk and Akgun (2020) found that with the implementation of the REAPS model, students were more engaged, utilized critical thinking skills, and the teacher's knowledge of science was enhanced (Duruk & Akgun, 2020). Gilbert et al. (2020) explored the perceptions and experiences of teachers based on their involvement with a science-focused university partnership (Gilbert et al., 2020). Data were collected with from 80 inservice teacher participants and results showed that the partnerships were beneficial for both the teachers and students (Gilbert et al., 2020).

Integrated Curriculum

Early childhood teachers utilize integrated curriculum to fit as many standards into lessons as possible (Simoncini & Lasen, 2018). Utilizing an integrated curriculum provides students the opportunity to fully engage in meaningful and relevant learning activities in multiple content areas that often connect to students' real life. An example of integrated curriculum is when the teacher integrates science or social studies topics into reading lessons, or when math concepts are embedded into reading, such as through the use of word problems. Additionally, the inclusion of STEM and STEAM instruction is on the rise due to the various real world concepts that are embedded for problem solving skills, peer collaboration, and technology (Julià & Antolí, 2019). Current research indicates that students in educational settings where STEM and STEAM instruction is promoted have higher levels of academic growth and success (Julià & Antolí, 2019; Monkeviciene et al., 2020; Simoncini & Lasen, 2018).

STEM

The United States Department of Education (2022) acknowledged the importance of STEM instruction in educational setting to best prepare students for the constantly changing and multifaceted world around them. They also encourage the implementation of STEM based practices that promote problem solving, knowledge dissemination, and collaboration skills. In fact, the government agency offers a multitude of grant opportunities to increase the use of STEM concepts in education (U. S. Department of Education. 2022). Teachers at the early childhood level frequently integrate the concepts of STEM based instruction in conjunction with science curriculums. Julià and Antolí

(2019) analyzed the effect of the implementation of a STEM-based curriculum on student motivation and promotion of active learning. Results showed a significant increase in scores from the first to the third term, which indicates that the STEM curriculum made a positive impact on student knowledge and efficacy (Julià & Antolí, 2019). Simoncini and Lasen (2018) explored teachers' perceptions of STEM and its importance in early childhood environments. The results suggested that teachers believe STEM is an important element in early childhood education, although children's social-emotional development ranked higher (Simoncini & Lasen, 2018).

Fleer (2020) explored how incorporating engineering practices in early childhood classrooms affected student's engagement. The study focused on how students responded to the activities in a Robin Hood PlayWorld over the course of a year and whether their engineering competence and motivation increased (Fleer, 2020). The conceptual framework was grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which is based on the concept that cognitive development is a process by which children acquire their social and cultural values and problem solving skills from adults (Fleer, 2020). Fleer found that children exhibited increased engineering competence through play and the activities in the Robin Hood PlayWorld. Students expressed these engineering competencies through writing, drawing, construction activities, and role playing during play time (Fleer, 2020). The results suggest that motivation and problem solving skills can be encouraged through the inclusion of imaginary play and more complex learning activities (Fleer, 2020). John et al. (2018) explored the implementation process of the Seeds of STEM curriculum and the engineering design process (EDP) in preschool classrooms. The goal was to improve

teacher self-efficacy in STEM pedagogy and increase children's development and problem solving skills. John et al. found that teachers who were involved in the entire implementation and curriculum development process increased their STEM pedagogy and knowledge regarding engineering and science concepts, which had a positive impact on their teaching practices and willingness to incorporate the new curriculum.

Julià and Antolí (2019) recommend future studies in which the learning activities with the lowest scores are redesigned to include STEM approaches and that the STEM curriculum is extended to include other student ages. Simoncini and Lasen (2018) recommended the inclusion of required STEM education in pre-service early childhood programs and professional development to promote continued knowledge and usage of STEM concepts in educational environments (Simoncini & Lasen, 2018). John et al. (2018) recommended further research to include exploration into specific elements of the STEM curriculum and how they impact student development and learning (John et al., 2018). Fleer (2020) recommended further research to support engineering competencies and to explore the relationship between motives and motivation in play-based learning.

STEAM

STEAM based instruction can be described as strategies that incorporate science, technology, engineering, art, and math in an effort to encourage problem solving, hands on activities, and the use of questioning. The STEAM model aligns with the ARCS theory used as the conceptual framework, as well as using concepts of child development to promote student engagement (Julià & Antolí, 2019). Monkeviciene et al. (2020) evaluated the effects of STEAM education and classroom practices on student

motivation, development, and critical thinking skills. The key findings indicated that the implementation of STEAM curriculum in early childhood education settings enhanced teaching strategies and made a positive impact on student motivation, development, and critical thinking skills (Monkeviciene et al., 2020).

Jamil et al. (2018) explored the perspectives of early childhood teachers after attending a professional development conference on STEAM teaching to identify the perceptions of effectiveness and implementation. The researchers found that participants had varying experiences at the conference and demonstrated a variation of opinions regarding the implementation of the STEAM activities and lesson plans in their own educational settings (Jamil et al., 2018). However, an overwhelming majority found the content learned at the conference beneficial and recommended the inclusion of the STEAM approach and pedagogy as an effort to incorporate twenty-first century thinking in teacher pre-service and professional development programs (Jamil et al., 2018). DeJarnette (2018) investigated the impact of a STEAM curriculum implementation on instruction in Grades K-2 in a high-needs school. Results showed that teachers gain confidence and proficiency in teaching the STEAM curriculum with time and students increased their collaboration and problem solving skills. DeJarnette (2018) recommended further investigation of STEAM curriculum implementation in K-2 classrooms

Nature Curriculum

Kuo et al. (2018) argued that lessons in nature allow students to rejuvenate their capacity for learning and that the inclusion of more lessons in nature imbedded into formal education is beneficial for students and increases engagement. Fifolt and Morgan

(2019) sought to investigate how participation in a farm school program affected student engagement and involvement. The case study took place at Jones Valley Teaching Farm (JVTF) in Birmingham, Alabama, and focused on hands on food education at the onsite school farm (Fifolt & Morgan, 2019). There were several positive findings from student participation in the farm school program including the opportunity for students to explore where food comes from and try new and healthy food options, work collaboratively, and participate in hands on, inquiry-based learning activities (Fifolt & Morgan, 2019). Kuo et al. (2018) sought to investigate the effectiveness of lessons in nature on subsequent classroom engagement. Data were collected from observations measuring student engagement inside the classroom following structured outdoor lessons over a period of ten weeks in two third grade classrooms (Kuo et al., 2018). The results showed that student engagement in the classroom was considerably increased after the lessons in nature than compared to the traditional lessons only (Kuo et al., 2018). Students required fewer redirections and teachers were able to cover more material without interruption after the lessons in nature (Kuo et al., 2018). Fifolt & Morgan (2019) recommended future studies to explore inquiry-based instruction in comparison to traditional classroom teaching methods.

Technology Curriculum

Sun (2020) explored the relationship between the use of social media as an academic tool and the relationship with student engagement and creativity. Sun (2020) sought to offer insight on methods in promoting student creativity and engagement. Data were collected from 652 student questionnaires and evaluated using structural equation

modeling (Sun, 2020). The study results supported the hypothesis that social media used in correlation with learning activities is beneficial in sparking creativity, critical thinking skills, and collaborative projects (Sun, 2020). The study also showed an improvement in student engagement when using social media in school (Sun, 2020). Sun recommended future studies that look at the same data from a longitudinal design standpoint and to compare the advantages and disadvantage of social media use in classrooms. Cheng et al. (2019) also investigated the relationship of technology to student engagement by exploring the effects of a mobile and technology based model on students' learning, attitudes, and problem solving skills in comparison to conventional methods. The study results showed that the new approach had more a greater influence on students' learning and problem solving than with the conventional method (Cheng et al., 2019).

Teacher Support, Relationships, and Positive Learning Environment

Pedler et al. (2020) explained that although it has been suggested in ample studies that a correlation exists between student engagement and academic success, strategies to improve engagement has not frequently included in teachers' pedagogical or professional development training. Cochran et al. (2017) explained that engagement is higher in classrooms with supportive teachers, challenging but attainable tasks, and student choice, illustrating the importance of this component in improving engagement. Bakhshaee and Hejazi (2017) sought to identify how students' perception of their school climate and teachers' positivity in the classroom affect students' levels of academic engagement. The researchers found that teacher efficacy and academic emphasis have a positive and significant impact on academic engagement (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017). Martella et al.

(2019) examined how establishing positive learning environments and implementing lessons intended to increase social interactions among first grade students effected their outlook toward school, behaviors in school, and academic achievement. The factor that showed the greatest impact was teacher modeling paired with direct guidance activities, which illustrates the importance of positive teacher student interactions. Johnston et al. (2019) concluded that children pick up on subtle cues from teachers and found a relationship between teachers' positive evaluations of students and children's perceptions of those who were considered most liked by their peers and teachers.

Hornstra et al. (2018) explored the correlation between teacher expectations and student motivation using the self-determination theory. Teachers completed a questionnaire and provided feedback regarding student academic characteristics. Students also completed a questionnaire regarding their perceived perceptions of teacher support as well as their levels of motivation and engagement. Researchers found a direct positive correlation between teacher expectations and levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement demonstrated by students (Hornstra et al., 2018). Findings from this study suggested that when teachers have higher expectations of students, most students have higher levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement. Nguyen et al. (2018) studied the correlation between student engagement and classroom characteristics and interactions. The researchers explained that the results of this study are consistent with similar previous studies and show that students with higher levels of interactions with other students and teachers are also demonstrate higher levels of classroom engagement (Nguyen et al., 2018).

Haerens et al. (2018) examined how educator's perceived level of support and control toward students affected their intrinsic motivation and level of school success. The results showed that teachers who demonstrated high levels of perceived support and low sense of control over students resulted in a substantially higher positive impact on student motivation and school success than those with low levels of perceived support and high sense of control over students (Haerens et al., 2018). Cents-Boonstra et al. (2020) studied student behaviors during classroom observations to isolate factors that affected student engagement. The study results illustrated that motivating teaching approaches, teacher support, and guidance during lessons had a positive influence on student engagement, whereas less structured and supportive teaching strategies resulted in students who were less engaged (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2020). Gasser et al. (2018) explored the effects of perceived low teacher support on students' emotional and academic well-being. The researchers believed that students with a low level of perceived support had long-lasting effects including depression, behavior problems, and struggles in school (Gasser et al., 2018). They explored how students' perceptions of teacher support and fairness developed into upper elementary grades as well as to what extent teachers' support alters academic achievement (Gasser et al., 2018). Key findings indicate that student engagement in class was found to be positively affected by higher student perceptions of teacher care and teacher justice (Gasser et al., 2018).

Hornstra et al. recommend future studies that investigate a varied approach to understanding factors that contribute to increased student motivation, engagement, and positive teacher–student relationships. Hornstra et al. used the self-determination theory

(SDT) for the conceptual framework for their study. Self-determination theory focuses on how students' motivation and engagement is affected by teacher behavior and support. Haerens et al. suggested future studies that focus on observing various styles of teachers' motivational abilities as well as explore the success of intervention programs and their influence on student motivational and engagement levels. Gasser et al. (2018) recommended further research to gain a deeper understanding of teacher justice, student perceptions, and student-teacher relationships. They also suggest studies that include a wider range of student age over a time frame longer than one year (Gasser et al., 2018). Cents-Boonstra et al. (2020) recommend future studies that focus specifically on teacher behaviors and strategies that cause fluctuations in student behaviors, as well as studies that focus on how professional development training in student engagement effects student motivation and success.

Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter 2, I provided a comprehensive and extensive review of current literature on student engagement, as well as related concepts including motivation, learning activities and outcomes, hands on and problem based learning, engagement within subject areas, and teacher support and instructional styles. These concepts from the conceptual framework and the review of the literature, support the problem and purpose of the study. The topics for the literature search and review were selected due to their correlation to student engagement and these elements provide an inclusive and cohesive analysis of recent literature on student engagement in early childhood classroom settings.

Through the literature I illustrated the importance of student engagement and how it impacts student achievement. (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Estévez, et al., 2021; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). My review of the literature revealed that researchers suggested that various instructional methods and teaching styles can have a profound effect on student engagement at the primary Grade K-2 levels (Culclasure et al., 2019; Fifolt & Morgan, 2019; Gasser et al., 2018; Julià & Antolí, 2019; Kurt & Sezek, 2021). Researchers implied there exists a relationship between student engagement and academic success. However, I did not find any research in which specific practices intended to improve students' engagement in learning activities were provided. In Chapter 3, I provide a detailed account of the research methodology, the research design and rationale, and my role as a researcher. I summarize the procedures of participant recruitment, selection, and data collection through interviews that adhere to the scripted interview protocol. Finally, the data analysis approach is elaborated upon, as well as procedures for establishing trustworthiness and ethical practices.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how K-2 teachers promote students' engagement in learning. The importance of student engagement in school has been well researched and identified as a substantial contributing factor in school success in early childhood education settings at the both the local and national levels (Pedler et al., 2020). A gap in practice at the local level is evident from K-2 teacher faculty meeting minutes from March 2021 through October 2021. Meeting minutes from the local primary grade school identify a gap between the current level of student engagement in instruction and the level of student engagement that is needed for students to be academically successful. At the national level, current research on student engagement supports this meaningful gap in practice at the local level. For example, Fifolt and Morgan (2019) and Pedler et al. (2020) explained that student lack of engagement in learning is an educational crisis on a national level that can greatly impact students' academic achievement. In Chapter 3, I elaborate on the research design and describe how conclusions were drawn about regarding ways to promote students' engagement. The research design and methodology is also clarified. Finally, I explain the researcher's role, the participant selection method, procedures, and details regarding data collection and analysis.

Research Design and Rationale

Two research questions were based on the conceptual framework and guided this basic qualitative study with interviews to explore how K-2 teachers promote student

engagement in learning. The research questions that guided this qualitative study with interviews are, as follows:

RQ1: How do kindergarten through second grade teachers promote student engagement by incorporating the use of active instructional practices to promote critical thinking and provide a framework about how children best learn, grow, and develop?

RQ2: How do kindergarten through second grade teachers promote student engagement by incorporating questioning to gain children's points of view, active or hands on learning, and problem solving skills?

The central concept that guided this study is how K-2 teachers address the low levels of student engagement in learning. The research tradition I selected for this study is the basic qualitative design. Merriam (2009) proposed that basic generic qualitative studies are useful in gaining an understanding about how people make meaning out of their experiences and interpret experiences in their own contexts. I followed an interview protocol using narrative techniques as described in Patten and Newart (2017) to collect data with interviews because I was able to explore how K-2 teachers promote students' engagement in learning most effectively with this tradition. Using interviews to collect data as the only data source was appropriate to gain K-2 teacher perspectives so they were able to freely share their perspectives (Patten & Newart, 2017). I considered a case study approach but recognized that approach would involve using multiple sources for collecting data in an individual setting (Creswell, 2009). A quantitative model was also considered but was not optimal for this study because of the number of participants

needed and the type of data needed for data collection (Creswell, 2009). The basic qualitative design with interviews was the most appropriate choice for this study.

Role of the Researcher

In this qualitative study, my role as the researcher was one of observer. My role was to develop a full understanding of all aspects related to the topic of student engagement, how teachers engage K-2 students, and the benefits of engagement for students in all domains of learning in K-2 self-contained classroom settings. I acted in the role of sole researcher in this study and conducted the interviews personally by following an interview protocol to collect data addressing the research questions to explore how K-2 teachers promote students' engagement in learning. I was also responsible for recording, transcribing, and analyzing data obtained from 15 interviews with K-2 grade teachers working in Grades K-2 rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. Participants were recruited through social media and the Walden University research participant pool with a snowballing strategy. Volunteers all met the study criteria and participants were not teachers that I knew personally or professionally, and none were individuals who I had worked with in the past.

Creswell and Poth (2017) explained that assumptions and biases may alter the data collection process. These biases and assumptions can have a negative impact on research, but they can also increase the researcher's awareness and insight throughout the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2017). As a teacher with more than 18 years of experience in varied early childhood education environments, I admittedly do have personal biases. I have developed personal viewpoints and ideas regarding student

engagement and related instructional practices. To prevent these biases from affecting the data or creating potential ethical concerns, I used two strategies identified by Ravitch and Carl (2021). First, I implemented a scripted interview protocol, so the questions and language used are consistent across all interviews (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, I was consistent with time, redirections, and prompts for additional information and rephrase responses to check for accuracy (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I also used a digital audio recording device designed to record the interviews to ensure all responses are documented accurately. Second, I kept a reflective journal to monitor my biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Ravitch and Carl explained that journaling throughout the research process is beneficial as it allows a researcher to reflect how personal biases and assumptions may impact the study.

Methodology

In this study, I used a basic qualitative study to explore the low levels of engagement in learning exhibited by K-2 grade students in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), qualitative research studies involve a small number of participants who share comparable life experiences. I recruited K-2 teachers with a minimum of 3 years teaching in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. The teachers participated in interviews that followed an interview protocol that aligned with the following research questions:

RQ1: How do kindergarten through second grade teachers promote student engagement by incorporating the use of active instructional practices to promote critical thinking and provide a framework about how children best learn, grow, and develop?

RQ2: How do kindergarten through second grade teachers promote student engagement by incorporating questioning to gain children's points of view, active or hands on learning, and problem solving skills?

Participant Selection

A purposeful sampling technique was utilized to recruit 15 K-2 volunteer teacher participants from rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. My aim was to accept volunteers who met the criteria for the study on a first come basis, in a manner that allowed me to accept 5 teachers per grade level between K and Grade 2. I confirmed that each participant is an experienced P-2 teacher who is knowledgeable about the concept of student engagement at the beginning of the interview process. Participants were recruited through social media and the Walden University research participant pool with a snowballing strategy as necessary. The participation criteria requirements included the following: (a) K-2 teachers with a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience, (b) teach in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States, and (c) are willing to participate in interviews via digitally audio recorded conferencing. The study was open to individuals of any gender, culture, age, or race as long as they met the other criteria. According to Creswell and Poth (2017) participants should be selected who can best inform and enhance the research questions and understanding of the concepts being studied.

The quantity of participants should be based on the number needed to fully inform the concept being studied and related research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this study, this number was appropriate due to the narrow scope and homogeneous nature of the concept being explored (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Volunteer teacher participants were provided with the informed consent document that clearly described the purpose of the study, the anticipated timeframe for the interviews and member checking, procedures, and risks and benefits associated with participation, and plans for distribution of the results via email (see Appendix B). Participants were informed that if they fully understood the contents of the informed consent document that they should have responded to my email with the words "I consent." In addition, during the interview protocol, I reviewed the criteria for participation in the study and if volunteers do not meet the criteria for participation, they were thanked and were asked to provide informed consent. I also included my contact information in case volunteers needed to reach me. I assumed that participants were honest regarding their eligibility of the criteria.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research open-ended questions provide rich data in which participants can best share their experiences regarding the concepts being explored (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The primary data collection tool for this basic qualitative study was ten interview questions. I created an interview protocol which was strictly adhered to and used for data collection (see Appendix B). The interview protocol instrument was developed based on a template provided by the Walden University IRB department. To

confirm content validity, the interview questions were sent to a district level expert panel in early childhood curriculum and instruction for review twice. To establish sufficiency of the interview protocol to answer the research questions, the research questions and interview questions were aligned with the conceptual framework (see Appendix A). Additionally, relevant follow up prompts were used to ensure the responses were in-depth, thorough, and clearly articulated.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

For this qualitative study with interviews, specific procedures were strictly adhered to regarding recruitment, participation, and data collection. The procedures followed are explained in the following subsections.

Recruitment and Informed Consent

The first step of the recruitment process was to gain approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB approval number: 04-14-22-0665107). Next, I completed the form to participate in the Walden University research participant pool. I also utilized a snowball strategy and social media to recruit 15 eligible participants. The listings clearly explained the criteria: seeking kindergarten-second grade teachers with three or more years of experience located in a rural area of the southern region of the United States. The listing also included my contact information for any additional questions, as well as the university's contact information. I communicated with potential volunteers via email. When interested individuals contacted me, I responded quickly and professionally via email with an informed consent form attached that further explained the details of the study. The intent of the study and the participant's privacy protection

plan were clearly explained. The teachers were asked to sign and return the informed consent form if they agreed to participate in the study. Participants were encouraged to keep a copy of the consent form for their records. Once the form was received, an interview time will be arranged, and a reminder was sent one day prior to the planned interview date.

Participation

For this study, the first 15 teachers who met the criteria and returned the signed consent forms were selected. The one-time interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour and were conducted via video conferencing. The frequency of interviews was dependent on scheduling availability of the participants. Participants were thanked for their time, given the opportunity to ask questions before we began, and the interview protocol was stated verbatim (see Appendix B). The interviews were recorded to collect and record the most accurate data. Transcription of interview data was completed shortly after each interview was conducted and each participant was able to participate in transcript checking. Once all interviews were completed following the interview protocol, I summarized all responses of participants to provide an opportunity for them to review the findings and add to or clarify information about their own personal responses. According to Harper and Cole (2012) researchers seek accuracy of data that has been collected, recorded, and transcribed following the interview process. Completing member checking improved the credibility and validity of data collected for this study (Harper & Cole, 2012). I then explained how the study results will be shared, thanked the participants again for their time, and concluded the interview.

Data Collection

Data were obtained from interviews with teachers of students in Grades K-2. The interview questions and protocols were provided in the appendices of this document (see Appendix B). Participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions prior to beginning the interview so they had an opportunity to compose their thoughts and isolate the most pertinent information they wished to share. The interviews were digitally recorded to aid with the transcription process. I also utilized field notes during the interviews so I could make note of additional information, including nonverbal language (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). A scripted interview protocol was used to prevent my personal biases from affecting the data or creating potential ethical concerns (see Appendix B). In addition, I followed the order of questions and prompts and maintain consistent timing for all interviews. Once the data were obtained, the audio recorded interviews were immediately transcribed verbatim while information and details were fresh by listening and reading data several times for accuracy. Data were consistently transcribed and organized as it was acquired. Data were then summarized and shared with participants of the study for the member checking process. The member checking process invited participants to confirm that the response summary was accurate or to clarify any content that did not reflect their comments.

Data Analysis Plan

After collecting data from in-depth interviews by following an interview protocol, I listened to digital audio recordings multiple times to check for accuracy as I transcribed each interview. I then prepared, organized, and analyzed data by connecting data to the

research question. No software was used. According to Creswell and Poth (2017) a vital step in the process is for the researcher to analyze the data to thoroughly understand the information. Creswell and Poth also explained that there are 6 steps in the qualitative data process: (a) collect, (b) prepare, (c) organize, (d) transcribe, (e) code the data, and (f) establish themes. As I followed the interview protocol, I took anecdotal notes, and these notes were also thoroughly reviewed to ensure all relevant information is included. I used Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word to organize the information and to sort the data into subheadings. Teacher participants were provided a copy of the transcription so they could have an opportunity to verify accuracy of the transcript data.

I then began to code the data. To begin the coding process, I immersed myself in the data as it was collected to assure familiarity with the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Saldaña's (2016) coding system was utilized to isolate the most appropriate and applicable coding method. Coding can be described as the process of analyzing, organizing, and classifying qualitative data to identify relevant themes and relationships (Saldaña, 2016). Due to the nature of this study, I utilized the descriptive code strategy, which utilizes superscript number to summarize the main concept of the excerpt (Saldaña, 2016). I also used thematic analysis to determine codes, patterns, categories, and themes that helped to answer the research questions. I started with a provisional list of a priori codes that aligned with the conceptual framework for the 1st cycle coding and implemented the descriptive code strategy for the 2nd cycle coding. I then analyzed data for patterns, categories, and emerging themes (Saldaña, 2016).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the confidence I have as a researcher in my sources and methods used throughout my research study to ensure the rigor of the qualitative findings (Burkholder et al., 2016). It goes hand in hand with the validity and the procedures that the researcher follows to ensure their findings are accurate and through quality and rigor (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). There are varying ways to achieve trustworthiness in a study. These include triangulation, audit trials, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The four key components of trustworthiness in qualitative research include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which are detailed below (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Credibility

Credibility is a crucial element concerning the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Essentially, credibility refers to the truthfulness of the data and the data analysis used by the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). By restating the interview responses to assure understanding and analyzing the interviews, I gained a deeper clarity of the data and avoid misinterpretations. I followed the interview protocol by asking each participant the same questions in the same order and used clear language to avoid any bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, member checks were utilized to aid in credibility (Harper & Cole, 2012). This means the study participants reviewed the findings and had an opportunity to verify their accuracy (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I communicated with each participant via email and participants were asked to notify me of the accuracy of the findings within one week (Harper & Cole, 2012).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the external validity of a study and how well it can be applied to other settings, groups, or studies (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I provided detailed descriptions of the data, themes, and procedures so researchers in other settings and groups can determine if my findings may be generalized or transferred into similar situations, and to ensure that readers are able to clearly understand the results (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Due to the nature of this study, there was limited transferability.

Dependability

Dependability in a study refers to the stability and consistency of the data over time (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). According to Saldaña (2016), researchers infrequently achieve coding success the first time. Therefore, one way I ensured dependability was by using the code-recode strategy (Saldaña, 2016). Recoding allows the researcher to gain a deeper perspective of the data and develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Saldaña, 2016). Finally, I used a reflexive journal to limit bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). By keeping a reflexive journal, I notated my personal experiences throughout the study to ensure that my own opinions, beliefs, and experiences did not impact the research.

Confirmability

The final criterion of trustworthiness is confirmability and occurs once credibility, transferability and dependability have been established. Confirmability can be described as the level of objectivity in the research and avoidance of any biases on behalf of the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To ensure confirmability, I utilized a reflective audit trail strategy in which detailed descriptions were consistently used to maintain a sense of

mindfulness in the study and data results (Saldaña, 2016). I documented the entire process including interpretations of the data, coding, and my rationale for establishing themes and patterns in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, I followed strict guidelines on scripted interview procedures, used prompts in a consistent manner, and allowed participants to lead the direction of the interviews by clarifying responses as needed (Saldaña, 2016).

Ethical Procedures

Ethical considerations and procedures are an important aspect of any qualitative study, particularly those that involve human participants. Before conducting any research, I sought approval from the IRB at Walden University who helped me address potential ethical issues. Once IRB approval was attained, participants were selected through a voluntary participation process through social media and the Walden participant with snowballing. I posted a participant invitation on the Walden portal and selected social media platform with a clear description of the study and my contact information. I did not know or have previously worked with any participant, and anyone I did know was excluded from volunteering for the study. All interviews were scheduled and conducted outside of contracted work hours for teachers and me. Each teacher participant provided their informed consent form prior to scheduling the interview per an IRB approved process of responding to email with the words, “I consent” (see Appendix B). Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they may stop the interview process at any time without any penalty to them. Participants’ confidentiality was protected by not sharing identifiable information and by using alphanumeric codes.

The process was clearly described at the beginning of each interview. Participant responses were clarified during the interview, and the results were communicated after the transcription process was complete. I also followed interview protocols to ensure that the process is consistent across participants, that I did not ask any leading questions, and did not react negatively to any responses (see Appendix B). I was the only one who conducted and recorded the interviews, and transcripts and notes have been kept confidential and stored on a password-protected computer. All information and data will also be secured in a locked file cabinet for at least 5 years upon completion of the study and will then be shredded and discarded. Finally, to offset potential bias, I accepted all study results and used a reflexive journal to help maintain neutrality, subjectivity, and to monitor my personal biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Summary

This basic qualitative study with interviews explored how kindergarten through second grade teachers can promote students' engagement in learning. Chapter 3 provides detailed information regarding the research methods, including the research design, my role as researcher, methodology, and participant selection. I also overviewed instrumentation, recruitment procedures, and participation. Finally, I addressed the data collection and analysis plan, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. All these components are in alignment with the purpose and research questions of the study. Chapter 4 will include data collection, analysis, results as well as evidence of trustworthiness, and a summary.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore how K-2 teachers promote student engagement in learning. The first research question for this study was developed to explore how K-2 teachers promote student engagement by incorporating the use of active instructional practices to promote critical thinking and provide a framework about how children best learn, grow, and develop. The second research question examined how K-2 teachers promote student engagement by incorporating questioning to gain children's points of view, active or hands on learning, and problem solving skills. Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of the setting for the study, the data collection process, and the data analysis results, which are organized by research question. Following evidence of trustworthiness, I present the conclusion of Chapter 4.

Setting

There were no related personal or organizational conditions that influenced participants or their experiences at the time of the study that effected the study results in any realm. Participants' demographics and characteristics relevant to the study included the following: (a) K-2 teachers with a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience, (b) teaching assignments in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States, and (c) willingness to participate in interviews via video conferencing. All 15 interviews were conducted via digitally audio recorded video conference and participants were encouraged to participate in the interview at a location that was private, comfortable, and where their confidentiality would be maintained. Conducting the interviews remotely aligned with COVID-19 protocols and restrictions and allowed me to interview

participants in a wider range of geographical locations. Participants were K-2 teachers in various rural schools located in the southern region of the United States.

Demographics

Fifteen K-2 female teachers participated in this study. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned an alphanumeric code. For example, the alphanumeric code AT1 represents the first kindergarten teacher participant I interviewed. Data were organized by grade level on a first come basis. As Table 1 displays, participants had varying years of teaching experience. Five participants had less than 10 years of experience, six participants had between 11 and 20 years of experience, and four participants had over 20 years in the teaching profession.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Alphanumeric code	Grade level	Years taught
AT1	Kindergarten	7
AT2	Kindergarten	16
AT3	Kindergarten	21
AT4	Kindergarten	18
AT5	Kindergarten	10
BT1	1st	8
BT2	1st	17
BT3	1st	28
BT4	1st	27
BT5	1st	12
CT1	2nd	5
CT2	2nd	13
CT3	2nd	9
CT4	2nd	8
CT5	2nd	20

Data Collection

Once I received approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB approval number: 04-14-22-0665107), participants were recruited through social media and the snowball strategy. Although I attempted to recruit through the Walden participant pool, I received no responses from potential volunteers using this method. An informed consent document was attached to each email, and once volunteers responded with the words "I consent," the interviews were scheduled. The first 15 teachers who met the criteria and consented via email were selected for the study.

To begin the interview process, I explained to each volunteer that participation was voluntary, and they could opt out at any time with no penalty. I then asked for each participant's verbal consent for the audio recorded interview (see Appendix B). After the verbal consent was received, I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix B). All participants were asked the same 10 questions in the same order, followed by the prompt as indicated on interview protocol to ensure that the same script was followed for each participant (see Appendix B). The prompts were used to give each participant an opportunity to elaborate on their first responses, if needed because of the brevity of the response. In addition to maintaining consistency with the language and prompts, I was also consistent with time as suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2021). Furthermore, I used a reflective journal to take notes so that I remained aware of my personal biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Interviews were conducted over a period of 3 weeks, on weekday afternoons and evenings or on weekends, outside of participants' working hours. Each interview lasted a

maximum of 45 minutes and was audio recorded with permission from each participant. I used two recording methods to ensure accuracy of data collected, as follows: the Zoom recording feature on the computer, and a voice recording application on my phone that provided audio to text transcription. I also took field notes during the interviews so I could make note of additional information, including keywords (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). There were no variations in data collection from the plan that was presented in Chapter 3. The only difficulty in data collection was finding enough participants to respond and commit, but with determination and persistence, I was able to secure five teachers in each grade level who met the criteria.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the following steps: transcribe the interviews by listening to the audio recordings numerous times, organize the interview data, code the data, review the data in order to recognize patterns and categories, collapse these to establish themes, and summarize the information (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I used Microsoft Word to organize and sort the data. Data collected from the 15 interviews gave me the opportunity to assure that saturation of data had been achieved through the interview process. All data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by me.

The first step of the data analysis process was to transcribe the interviews. I began transcribing each participant's digitally recorded interview upon completion of the interview. Digital audio recordings and transcripts were assigned alpha numeric codes to aid in organization by the grade level taught and to protect participants' privacy. Kindergarten teachers were given the code AT1…AT5; first grade teachers BT1…BT5;

and second grade teachers CT1…CT5. I transcribed each interview by playing the recording and dictating into Microsoft Word. I made corrections and edited as necessary to reflect the verbatim responses from each participant. I listened to each recording multiple times to check for accuracy. Listening to each multiple times and transcribing the interviews word for word allowed me to become familiar with the data and provided an opportunity to disseminate the data. I then sent each interviewee their transcript to review and verify that I had accurately recorded everything. Once the participants confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts via email, I inputted the data question by question to begin organizing the data for coding. I reread the transcripts to immerse myself in the data and assure familiarity with the information collected (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

After organizing the transcripts, the next step in the data analysis was to code the data and data patterns began to emerge. Saldaña's (2016) descriptive coding was used to summarize the main concept of the excerpts and to identify relevant themes and relationships. Microsoft Word was used to sort the data into subheadings, including patterns in the responses that were noted by several teacher participants. The first level coding resulted in 442 codes from which categories began to emerge based on important phrases. No discrepant codes were identified. The codes were based on the conceptual framework of this study: a combination of constructivist theory and the attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction (ARCS) model, both of which are grounded on how students learn and develop and were organized by the framework, research question, and interview question (see Appendix A). I meticulously evaluated the raw data looking

for respondents' use of repeated or similar words, which were highlighted, color coded, collapsed, and categorized. According to Saldaña (2016), these repeated codes were considered to be patterns. During this second cycle of coding, these 442 codes were collapsed, and 71 specific patterns and categories were revealed (see Appendix C). The second codes that emerged included phrases such as promoting student success, active participation, appeal to all learning styles, building relationships, and plan for short attentions spans (see Appendix C). Once the horizontal charts for each interview question was complete, I further collapsed the second cycle of patterns and categories into themes (see Appendix D). I compiled the most frequently used codes for each of the two research questions (RQ). This process helped me to identify the themes for each RQ, and therefore the answers to each question. From a synthesis of these data, seven themes emerged.

Table 2

Examples of Patterns & Categories and Themes that Emerged

Patterns & Categories	Themes
1. Positive learning environments, develop strong relationships, student support, develop confidence, positive feedback, scaffold tasks, grouping strategies, routine, structure, procedures, clear expectations, proximity, classroom environment	Theme 1: Created a Positive Learning Environment
2. Frequent movement, active instruction, hands on activities, music, peer collaboration, games, fun, STEM, science experiments, participatory, manipulatives, limited attention spans, frequent activity change, age-appropriate lesson planning	Theme 2: Used Active "Hands On" Instructional Practices
3.Appeal to all learning styles, tactile, visual, singing, active learning, differentiated instruction, manipulatives, choice boards, dry erase boards, journals, data notebooks, relate learning to students lives, incorporating student interests, adjusting instruction to meet students' individual abilities, collaboration	Theme 3: Selected Activities to Meet Students' Learning Styles.
4.Small group instruction, active engagement, collaboration, small group procedures, routines and expectations, group work, peer collaboration, stations and centers, share ideas, ability grouping, peer mentors, informal assessments, student choice, leadership	Theme 4: Varied Group Size per Activity
5.Positive reinforcement, student motivation, attention to task, student morale and confidence, routines and procedures, structure, teach responsibility, good choices, positive feedback, proximity, want to be recognized, acknowledge progress, teacher-student meetings, ask questions, open-ended questions, morning meetings, starting the day with positivity, notes on desk or notes sent home	Theme 5: Reinforced Goals of Behavior
6. Extrinsically motivated, rewards, behavior, task completion, engagement, effort, STEM bends, ClassDojo, fun Friday, motivation, positive feedback, positive reinforcement, praise from peers, student support, motivation, scaffold instruction, treasure box, school store, earn points/dollars, cash in for treats/rewards	Theme 6: Motivated through various rewards
7. Questioning strategies, open ended questions, outside of the box thinking, anchor charts, graphic organizers, visual displays, experiments, journals, hands on learning, hand signals, X band answers, explain reasoning, mistakes are OK, problem solving skills,	Theme 7: Provided memory enhancers, clues, signals

Note. This table displays the codes I established from the interview data and how they were collapsed into categories, then themes.

Results/Findings

In this basic qualitative study, I addressed the problem of the low levels of engagement in learning exhibited by K-2 students in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. The purpose of this study was to explore how K-2 teachers promote student engagement in learning. I used purposeful sampling and interviews to collect data from 15 K-2 teachers (five for each K-2 grade level). An inductive process was followed to identify codes, patterns, categories, and themes in the data. The conceptual framework for the study was based on a combination of constructivist theory and the attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction (ARCS) model, both of which are based on how students learn and develop. The findings of this study indicated the perspectives of how K-2 teachers promote student engagement in learning, which revealed themes that answered RQI and RQ2 as follows:

1. Created a positive learning environment
2. Used active “hands on” instructional practices
3. Selected activities to meet students’ learning styles
4. Varied group size per activity
5. Reinforced goals of behavior
6. Motivated through various rewards
7. Provided memory enhancers, clues, signals

The a priori codes were imbedded in the two research questions (see Appendix A). The a priori codes for RQ 1 came from Bruner’s (1966) constructivist theory, which incorporated the use of active instructional practices to promote critical thinking and

provide a framework about how children best learn, grow, and develop. Specifically, they are *active instructional practices*, *critical thinking*, and *framework* (Saldaña, 2016). The a priori codes for RQ 2 came from Julià and Antolí's (2019) ARCS (attention, relevance, confidence, satisfaction) model, which incorporated questioning to gain students' points of view, active or hands on learning, and problem solving skills. Specifically, they are *questioning*, *points of view*, and *problem solving* (Saldaña, 2016). In the following section, I will discuss each theme that emerged and present brief summaries, my analyses, and quotes from participant responses.

Theme 1: Created a Positive Learning Environment

All the teacher participants discussed the importance of creating positive learning environments in their classrooms and developing strong relationships with students, so they feel supported. Teachers expressed the views that when students are supported, they are more willing and likely to put forth effort to become engaged in learning. Most teachers expressed that they can help students develop confidence by giving them positive feedback, scaffolding tasks, and grouping for collaboration and peer support. Several participants discussed the importance of encouraging self-efficacy and resilience in their students. Many participants believe that teaching and implementing structure, routines, and procedures helped students understand their expectations and created an environment more conducive to higher levels of engagement. Teacher AT5 stated that "classroom management is the cornerstone for engagement" and that "having a solid routine and structure in my classroom sets the stage for them to be engaged." Participant BT2 stated, "I think building relationships is the key to getting students to want to work

hard." CT1 concurred and shared, "I think building relationships is the key. If they know you care about them, they are likely to try harder."

Teacher AT5 stated:

> I do like probably 5-6 room transformations a year. I've got play centers - a kitchen and blocks, a sensory table, stem bends - all that kind of stuff that they get to use, usually at the end of the day. That's like their actual free choice… they're willing to do what I'm asking them to do because they know I 'm going to back it up and let them have some autonomy and choice.

Most teachers stressed the importance of building relationships because they believed a positive classroom environment is an important element in student engagement and instilling a love of learning. Participant CT5 shared, "Building relationships and having a positive classroom environment improves engagement because students are more comfortable." BT3 stated:

> I think engagement comes with positive connections so if they know they are loved and cared for then the walls and barriers come down and they buy into whatever we are learning. I tell them making mistakes are a sign that they are trying.

Finally, participant AT4 shares that if "students feel comfortable at school and have strong relationships with their teacher and peers they are more likely to enjoy coming to school and enjoy learning." CT3 explained that "students must feel comfortable in order to share their thoughts, answers, and feelings." By building relationships with their students, teachers were able to create classroom communities

where students feel safe and supported, are more willing to take risks, share their ideas and responses, interact with peers, and be more engaged. Teachers revealed that these practices promoted the academic success of their students, as well as their overall attitude towards school.

Theme 2: Used Active "Hands On" Instructional Practices

The majority of participants also perceive that frequent movement, and active or hands on activities are vital for increasing student engagement with these grade levels. Teachers in this study across grade levels employed varied and hands on activities, addressed different learning styles, by using hand signals, chants, songs, movement, and experiments to increase engagement. Ten teachers feel incorporating music helps, and eleven felt peer collaboration is an important factor. All the teachers try to make learning fun, incorporate the use of games, or use STEM bends. Science experiments, turning traditional activities into more hands on participatory activities, and providing manipulatives for students to use were all common responses. Several feel that students in this age group have limited attention spans, and therefore frequently changed activities and created lesson plans accordingly. Participant BT5 shared, "I feel students are most engaged when they are involved with hands on activities." CT3 stated, "Kids seem to love these hands on activities and I feel that it challenges them more than traditional methods."

Almost all teachers stated they incorporate frequent movement or brain breaks into instructional time. Most changed activities frequently as young students are not developmentally able to focus for long periods of time. Because of this, the majority of

teachers use hands on activities and incorporate movement to address the short attention spans typical of this age group. BT4 said, “With first graders, I try to make sure most of the time that they're not just sitting and listening - that they're active participants in their learning.” Teacher AT3 explained that students are “not going to be sitting still being quiet, they are going to be communicating with one another, collaborating - they're going to be sharing with one another.”

To increase engagement, most teachers stated they try to make learning fun, use games, and incorporate music, movement, and songs. Categories related to this theme included using manipulatives, grouping strategies, varying learning activities, offering collaboration, promoting fun, including play, brainstorming, and keeping students active by moving. Teacher AT1 used “anything to make the activity fun and keep the students active and busy,” while AT2 frequently incorporated “an experiment that goes with what we are learning, such as planting seeds to watch them grow.” Participant AT4 shared that she “basically incorporates movement into everything we do.”

Several teachers use brainstorming with groups of students to promote their active listening. BT3 stated, “I don't expect them to sit still and be quiet. We will brainstorm with movement. I tried to keep them moving, collaborating, and thinking.” Teacher BT5 shared, “I try to get them out of their seats, moving and doing as much as possible. I feel students learn from one another and benefit from collaboration.” Participant CT1 explained, “I feel like math concepts are easier to teach when you implement hands on learning such as the use of manipulatives,” and CT5 said, “I also try to make a game out of as much as possible.”

The teacher participants in this study utilize a variety of strategies to incorporate active and hands on instruction. All participants felt this is an integral element in early childhood education due to the developmental needs of this age group. Although the specific strategies varied slightly, the inclusion of movement, music, elements of fun, games, and peer collaboration are utilized in an effort to increase student engagement.

Theme 3: Selected Activities to Meet Students' Learning Styles

Teachers perceived that addressing students' varied learning styles is an important element in K-2 classrooms. Several explained that they try to address different learning styles by using varied instructional activities. All the teachers utilize manipulatives as a hands on learning tool, and many use student choice boards, dry erase boards, and journals. One teacher uses data notebooks with her first graders in which they record their progress. She stated this helps them understand where they are and where they need to be. BT3 explained that students are all "different and have different learning styles, abilities, and interests," and allows her students to find their own partners and "collaborate based on learning styles and personality."

Several teachers felt that relating learning to children's own lives and interests increased their engagement levels. Teacher AT1 shared:

> The biggest strategy I use is to appeal to all learning styles and incorporate activities that include tactile, singing, active learning. Also, incorporating small group instruction is also a key factor in keeping kindergartners engaged.

AT3 stated:

> I try to plan lessons and activities that teach skills but are still fun. I think children learn best through music and movement. I try to incorporate different learning styles and various activities. Basically, we do a lot of hands-on activities. Talking and problem solving, collaborating, and sharing opinions. I try to make sure they know I care and have a vested interest in their success. I also try to plan activities that they will remember. Basically, shared experiences that they will take with them when they leave my class.

Teacher participants supported the use of varied instructional practices to address the different learning styles of their students. Several described the four types of learners as visual, tactile, auditory, or kinesthetic. Due to the fact that most children learn best from a combination of these styles, the teachers incorporate a variety of teaching strategies in order to address all learner types.

Theme 4: Varied Group Size per Activity

Data analysis results revealed that all the participants use small group instruction in their classrooms in an effort to keep students actively engaged and collaborating. Most of the teachers felt that students were more engaged when activities involved movement, frequent change of the learning activity, collaborated with their peers, and incorporated student choice. Small group instruction techniques can vary according to the individual teacher, but all stated that use student grouping in some realm, including think, pair, share, turn and talk, ability grouping, or peer mentors. Small group instruction also allows teachers to meet or work with individual students on their own level and provides an opportunity for informal assessments to check for student understanding.

Participant AT1 shared that she teaches small group procedures at the beginning of the school year so students know the routines and expectations, and teacher AT2 perceived that, “engagement is also increased when everybody feels like they are part of a group. Group work doesn't allow for students to zone out because it keeps them on their toes.” Participant AT4 uses small group stations daily along with think, pair, share to encourage collaboration and share ideas. Many teachers use ability grouping where students are on similar academic levels, but some participants partner stronger students with those who needs more support.

Participant BT1 shares, “in small groups I frequently use the phrase “show what you know” as quick informal assessments and to check that students are on task. Teacher CT3 allow students to “choose groups because I feel they can put themselves into groups better than I can. I also think it also gives them a sense of leadership and initiative to group and work independently.”

All participants mentioned the importance of grouping. Teachers perceived that small groups, partners, and peer mentoring helps to keep students engaged. Several participants stated they frequently use the turn and talk, or think, pair, share strategies and collaborative learning is a key factor in student engagement. AT4 explained, “We use think, pair, share to encourage collaboration and share ideas. The more students can explain what they are doing and how they arrived at that answer the better they understand.”

All 15 teachers felt collaboration and support from peers was a vital element in improving student success and engagement. Participant BT4 shares “children who talk in

school perform at a much higher level", and CT5 explained, "Students love working together. I think this is a motivator to be more involved in the lesson. It also gives them more accountability." Finally, metacognitive teaching strategies were used during collaborative grouping activities to encourage students to explain their reasoning or strategizing and presenting an argument or alternative view when thinking outside the box.

Theme 5: Reinforced Goals of Behavior

Unanimously, all teacher participants expressed their views that positive reinforcement is a vital element to increasing student motivation, attention to task, and student moral and confidence. Many teach and review routines and procedures, and establish a sense of structure, so students know what the expectations are as well as the schedule. Teacher AT1 stated, "I use every opportunity to teach responsibility and making good choices." AT2 suggested that "positive feedback makes a big difference, especially from peers." Participant CT1 stated, "I try to notice and compliment those who are engaged."

Several teachers use proximity to keep students on task and focused. Participant AT4 shares, "I use a lot of positive reinforcement to motivate students. I think if they know you care they are more willing to try harder," and that "students this age want to please and also want to be recognized when they make progress or make good choices." Teacher BT2 explains that she calls on students "only when I am confident they will know the answer to increase their confidence. I meet with them one-on-one, ask questions to check for understanding, and to show them that they know more than they

think." Participant BT3 felt that starting the day on a positive note and maintaining positivity makes a valuable impact. Teacher CT1 shared that she "sends positive notes home. They love those. If they went up in iReady or a test… just reassuring that at home. Or as I am grading papers, I will call them back and congratulate them on their hard work." Participant CT5 shared:

> I use sticky notes to write little notes for students. So when they come in they may have a positive note on their desk like "let's have a great day, or "I like how you"… I think this sets a positive frame of mind when they get to school.

CT2 expressed, "I try to focus on student strengths: 'you're really good at this, so let's use what you know to help you solve this.' I try to relate everything to their lives and build upon prior knowledge." Finally, CT5 shared, "I also use sticky notes to give compliments such as 'I saw you being a good friend' and 'great job at …'This makes children feel good about things they may not be confident about otherwise." Teachers in this study reinforced goals of behavior using a variety of strategies including positive reinforcement and feedback, proximity, and compliments. The participants perceive that positive reinforcement is a vital element in building relationships, increasing student confidence, encouraging optimum effort and good choices, and increasing student engagement.

Theme 6: Motivated Through Various Rewards

Teachers found students are extrinsically motivated, and use rewards as positive reinforcement for behavior, task completion, engagement, and effort. All participants also provide rewards- both extrinsic and intrinsic. Many teachers use stem bends at the end of

the day to encourage students to complete tasks and stay focused. Many teachers/schools use a program called ClassDojo in which students receive points they can cash in at the end of the week for a trip to the goody box or school store. The majority of teachers use fun Friday as a motivating factor, and all reported using positive feedback as an intrinsic motivator. Several send notes home as positive reinforcement, and others reported using praise from peers as a student support system. To help with motivation, many teachers reported scaffolding instruction, in which they start with tasks they are confident students can master and increase the difficulty level from there.

Participant AT2 shared:

> Receiving positive feedback from classmates is very important also. Students will give two claps when a student gives a correct or good answer. They love this. I copied fake $100 bills that I give students for thoughtful responses. Also, just general praise for trying or attempting a difficult task is important. Really, anything to recognize their efforts.

Teacher AT5 explained, “We do affirmations in here every day so I say with them: ‘I am smart, I am kind, I can do hard things, I can learn new things, my teachers care about me.’” BT3 stated, “They record mistakes in their data notebooks, discuss them and their scores go up. I tried to put the students in the driver seat. It increases their confidence, motivation, and desire to achieve.” BT4 shared,

> I try to find what they are able to do and build upon it. I provide tons of positive feedback and celebrate accomplishments. I also tell them that we all make mistakes but that is proof that you are trying, and we can grow from our mistakes.

Teacher representative CT2 explained that, “I basically offer rewards for finishing tasks. For example, students can earn free time, computer time, or self-choice when they are finished with an assignment.” BT4 shared that, “students can earn money for completing homework (just for practice, not grades). I only have one child all year that didn't do homework. They love going to the store and I feel it really helps with motivation.” Participant CT4 stated that she uses use Class Dojo as both a reward system in which students earn trips to the treasure box, and to communicate with parents so they know how their students are doing with task completion. Participant CT3 explained,

> My three lowest readers are in a book group where they take home the same book and read it day and night for the week. They earn stars for each time they read it which can earn them a trip to the treasure/prize box. This has been very helpful with the students and they like being in that group. I try to focus on strengths and not draw attention to weaknesses.

Finally, the participants unanimously agreed that using a reward system is vital for K-2 students. They perceived that using both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards is beneficial in increasing student motivation, effort, and engagement. Additionally, all teacher participants perceived that extrinsic rewards work well with K-2 students.

Theme 7: Provided Memory Enhancers, Clues, Signals

Almost all participants use open-ended questions, encourage students to explain their reasoning, and try to get students to “think outside the box”. Several teachers also shared that they teach students that making mistakes is a sign that they are trying, and that one can grow and learn from their mistakes. All of the teachers reported that they

used anchor charts or graphic organizers as visual displays, and experiments or journals to increase hands on learning. Several, especially the kindergarten teachers, reported using hand signals as an effort to keep students engaged and moving.

Participants discussed the importance of classroom management to promoting student engagement. Many participants talked about setting high expectations for appropriate classroom behaviors. Several overtly taught rules, routines, procedures, and processes students would follow for participation such as hand signals, listening and responding, and orderly movement about the room. Most posted agendas for the day and charts in their classrooms for clues, cues, and memory aids. AT1 shared that she tries to "ensure the students know the expectations, procedures, and schedule. I feel like this helps them to know what to expect and what is expected of them." This participant also shared that she teaches small group procedures and uses anchor charts as visible reminders, which she reviews regularly. Teacher CT2 stated, "Basically, I try to give them a visual to help them see the problem in a more physical versus abstract way."

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in research is vital element to ensure confidence in the data (Burkholder et al., 2016). Several strategies were implemented to account for credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability throughout the research process, which are detailed below (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Credibility

In order to establish credibility, I restated the interview responses to assure understanding and by analyzing data obtained from interviews. I gained a deeper clarity

of the data and eluded potential misinterpretations. I followed the interview protocol exactly and asked the interview questions in the same order using clear language to avoid any bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Upon completion of the study, I sent each participant a copy of the findings and asked them to check for any discrepancies and review the information for any points of clarification. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), this is one method to ensure credibility in trustworthiness. A few participants responded within two weeks to report they were no discrepancies and they concurred with the findings. A few participants also expressed their appreciation for allowing their participation in the study.

Transferability

Detailed descriptions of the data, themes, and procedures were provided; however transferability is limited, and based on the judgment of readers. These reflections may be generalized or potentially used from this study for similar situations or future studies on comparable topics. This also provides readers with details that may help readers understand the study results.

Dependability

Dependability in a study assures that the research findings are applicable and consistent (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Several strategies were implemented to increase the dependability of this study cited in literature on research. First, I used an audit trail that included keeping detailed notes and digitally recording the interviews to ensure transparency in the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An audit trail is a thorough description of the research process from start to finish, including the steps used

in the data collection and analysis processes. I utilized alphanumeric codes for participants to maintain detailed documentation and organize information throughout the data analysis process using an audit trail. Finally, I noted all the steps relating to collecting and analyzing data. Secondly, I used the code-recode strategy. Saldaña (2016) suggested that the code-recode strategy allows the researcher to gain a deeper perspective of the data and phenomena. Finally, I used a reflexive journal to limit bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Keeping a reflexive journal allowed me to notate my personal experiences throughout the study to ensure that my own opinions, beliefs, and experiences did not impact the research.

Confirmability

Once credibility, transferability and dependability were established, confirmability was ensured by maintaining the following reflective documents: a reflexive journal, interview transcripts, and audit trails. Burkholder et al. (2016) state that utilizing reflective documentation is an essential component of confirmability. Using a reflective audit trail, in which detailed descriptions were consistently used, helped to maintain a sense of mindfulness in the study and data results (Saldaña, 2016). The entire process was documented, including interpretations of the data, coding, and the rationale for establishing themes and patterns in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, I strictly adhered to the scripted interview procedures, using prompts in a consistent manner, and allowing participants to lead the direction of the interviews by clarifying responses as needed (Saldaña, 2016).

Summary

Participants in this study were 15 K-2 teachers in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. Participants shared their insight and strategies by answering ten in depth interview questions that pertained to student engagement. The conceptual framework that guided this study was a combination of constructivist theory and the attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction (ARCS) model. Data collected in interviews were coded and analyzed, revealing patterns, categories, and emerging themes. Findings of this study indicated the perspectives of how K-2 teachers promoted student engagement in learning to answer two research questions. Teachers in this study did the following: (a) created a positive learning environment; (b) used active "hands on" instructional practice; (c) selected activities to meet students' learning styles; (d) varied group size per activity; (e) reinforced goals of behavior; (f) motivated through various rewards; and (g) provided memory enhancers, clues, and signals. Chapter 4 outlined information relating to participant demographics and the setting of the study, the data collection processes, and data analysis details. I also reviewed the results of the study, evidence of trustworthiness, and provided a chapter summary. In Chapter 5, I share the interpretations of the findings, the limitations of this study, and recommendations for future research. Finally, in Chapter 5, I provide an overview of the implications and the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how K-2 teachers promote student engagement in learning. The nature of the study was a basic qualitative study research design with interviews to explore the two related research questions. I conducted this study due the lack of engagement and low levels of academic achievement exhibited and reported in the local setting that prompted my interest in this study topic (Faculty meeting minutes, March 23, 2021; State Department of Education, 2022). Bakhshaee and Hejazi (2017) explained that learning and academic success is greatly affected by how engaged students are in school and disengagement negatively may create a long-term cycle of school related problems (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017). Additionally, related studies have recommended further research to explore methods to promote student engagement (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Hojnoski et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2019). Stakeholders for this study included students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Key findings indicate that teachers use a variety of strategies to promote student engagement including creating a positive learning environment, using active “hands on” instructional practices, selecting activities to meet students’ learning styles, and varying the group size according to the learning activity. Additionally, teacher participants reported that they reinforce goals of behavior, use various rewards to motivate students, and provide memory enhancers, clues, and signals as methods to increase student engagement. Finally, I found that regardless of the rural southern location or the

resources available, each participant had valuable and insightful strategies to share, and each was an integral part of a vibrant, creative teaching community.

Interpretation of the Findings

The peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2 illustrated that student disengagement results in a significant and lasting deficit in learning and development, a lack of motivation, and off-task behaviors (Bakhshaee & Hejai, 2017; Pedler et al., 2020; Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). Additionally, prior research showed that although there is a relationship between students' engagement and their academic success, few studies focused specifically on teachers' perspectives on how to improve and sustain student engagement (Bakhshaee a& Hejazi, 2017; Cochran et al., 2017). These researchers recommended further studies to identify specific methods to motivate students to promote learning (Bakhshaee a& Hejazi, 2017; Cochran et al., 2017). The results of the study contribute to the field of early childhood education by providing strategies that can be implemented to promote student engagement in learning. The findings represent the perspectives of 15 K-2 teachers, with an average of 15 years of experience in early childhood education. The themes emerged when I collapsed the patterns and categories.

Research Question 1: Themes Related to Past Literature

Findings from Research Question 1 revealed that teacher participants utilize numerous and varied strategies to promote student engagement in K-2 classrooms. The first research question for this study explored how K-2 teachers promote student engagement through instructional practices to promote critical thinking and provide a framework about how children best learn, grow, and develop.

The first theme to emerge in response to this question was that teachers use activities that match students' learning styles. This aligns with the findings of Muñoz-García and Villena-Martínez (2021), who investigated the relationship between student engagement and approaches to learning and found a positive relationship between learning engagement with strategic approaches. Aelterman et al. (2019) investigated how teaching styles affected students' motivation and engagement and found a positive relationship between the four primary measures. The researchers recommended future studies to further examine subareas, including incorporating student interests and learning styles (Aelterman et al., 2019). Finally, Ling and Hamzaid (2019) concurred with the perceptions of teachers in this study that using the whole child approach is a valuable strategy to maximize children's developmental domains.

The second theme that emerged was that teachers use small group instruction and vary the group size according to the activity in an effort to promote active engagement. This aligns with the findings of Kurt and Sezek (2021), which showed a substantive difference in student engagement in the groups in which peer instruction and collaboration were used. Näkk and Timoštšuk (2019) also found a direct relationship between student engagement in learning and classroom variables, teaching strategies, and interactions with peer and teachers. Anthony et al. (2021) explored the effect of interpersonal skills, engagement, and motivation on students' academic achievement and found a connection between students' academic achievement and positive relationships and interactions with peers.

The third and final theme that emerged for RQ1 was that teachers reinforce goals of behavior. Many of the participants reported they make sure students know the learning goals and schedule and feel that routine and structure is a valuable element in a classroom where students are more engaged. This aligns with the findings of DeJarnette (2018) who proposed that children gain knowledge through interacting with their environment and with others which increases their critical thinking skills, motivation, and engagement in learning. Vostal and Mrachko (2021) found that providing students with choices and opportunities for collaboration increased problem solving skills and engagement and decreased negative student behaviors. Cents-Boonstra et al. (2020) studied student behaviors to identify factors that affected student engagement. The findings illustrate that students in structured and supportive classrooms demonstrated increased levels of engagement compared to those in more chaotic learning environments (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2020).

Research Question 2: Findings Related to Past Literature

The second research question examined how K-2 teachers promote student engagement by incorporating questioning to gain children's points of view, active or hands on learning, and problem-solving skills. The first theme to emerge in response to this question was that teachers promote student engagement through the implementation of a positive learning environment where students feel safe and comfortable and are therefore more willing to take risks and be an integral part of the learning community. This aligns with the findings of Hedges (2021), who suggested that early childhood education environments should include a broad range of children's interests and potential

career outcomes to provide an engaging, motivating learning environment. Muñoz-García and Villena-Martínez (2021) also concluded a positive relationship between learning engagement with strategic approaches and positive environmental behavior. Shaw (2019) found that when teachers positively interact with and support students individually and students are given the opportunity to express themselves, it not only improves the student to teacher relationship, but students' general outlook toward learning and school as well. Nguyen et al. (2018) concluded that students with higher levels of interactions with other students and teachers are also demonstrate higher levels of classroom engagement.

The second theme that emerged was that teachers used active, or hands on instructional practices in order to maintain higher levels of student engagement. This aligns with research by Cochran, et al. (2017), whose findings indicated that students in learner-centered classrooms exhibit more student power, motivation and engagement. Martella et al. (2020) concluded that students demonstrated increased levels of CVS knowledge with the hands-on learning activities compared to the passive learning activities. Fifolt and Morgan (2019) found several positive results from student participation in the farm school program including the opportunity for students to explore where food comes from and try new and healthy food options, work collaboratively, and participate in hands on, inquiry-based learning activities. Alvi and Gillies (2021) found that self-regulated learning used in conjunction with experiential learning resulted in more engaged and active learning, a connection with real-life experiences, and increased motivation, critical, and problem-solving skills.

The third theme that emerged was that teachers motivate students through the use of various rewards. This aligns with a study by Erickson and Wharton (2019), who explored how educators could assist in encouraging autonomous motivation and found that when students are offered choices and provided support from teachers and peers they exhibited higher levels of intrinsic motivation. Cents-Boonstra et al. (2020) studied student behaviors in an effort to isolate factors that affected student engagement and found that motivating teaching approaches, support, and guidance during lessons had a positive influence on student engagement. Haerens et al. (2018) examined how teacher support affected students' intrinsic motivation and level of school success and concluded that teachers who demonstrated high levels of perceived support and low sense of control over students made a substantially higher positive impact on student motivation and school success than those with low levels of perceived support and high sense of control over students.

The fourth theme that emerged was that teachers motivate students providing memory enhancers, clues, and signals. This aligns with a study by Aelterman et al. (2019), who investigated how teaching styles affected students' motivation and engagement. The researchers used four primary measures -- support, structure, control, and chaos -- as well as eight subcategories to measure student outcomes (Aelterman et al., 2019). Researchers identified positive relationships between the measures and student motivation (Aelterman et al., 2019).

Saripah and Widiastuti (2019) examined the frequency and effects of off-task behavior and found that 60% of the student participants demonstrated moderate off-task

behavior which had a negative effect on the student development and learning. The researchers concluded that factors that had positive effects on student engagement included teacher interventions based on behavioral learning theories, effective classroom management practices, and self-management strategies (Saripah & Widiastuti, 2019). Näkk and Timoštšuk (2019) found a direct relationship between student engagement in learning and classroom variables, including classroom management, structure, and routines.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted with 15 participants, who were K-2 teachers with a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience in rural schools located in the southern region of United States. The first limitation was difficulty recruiting the designated amount of teacher participants in each grade level. After receiving approval from IRB, I completed the listing for the Walden participant pool. I never received any response from this recruitment method. I also posted the study details on my personal Facebook page and asked people to respond in a private message if they or someone they knew met the criteria and may be interested. When potential volunteers contacted me, I confirmed they met the criteria, then emailed them the invitation and consent form. Within the first week, I had scheduled the first nine interviews, but then the responses slowed down. Upon the completion of each interview, I asked participants if they knew anyone else who may be willing to share their time and input. Through this snowball strategy, I sent out 18 emails in an effort to find the last six participants. I secured four more this way, but unfortunately, several responded with an interest, but never confirmed a time, and three

scheduled interviews did not show up at the agreed upon time. I sent out six more emails to kindergarten teachers (the grade level where I needed more) at two rural schools where other participants taught. This finally worked, and I scheduled the last two needed interviews.

The second limitation was personal bias. As an early childhood educator with 18 years of varied experiences, my opinion might have presented a bias. To avoid any opinion bias, I reviewed the interview recordings and transcripts several times. To ensure accuracy, all interviews were summarized and emailed to the participants via email for member checking. I also used a reflective journal to monitor my biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The final limitation was restrictions related to COVID-19 that prevented in-person interviews as a data collection method. To address this limitation, I recruited through social media and the snowballing strategy via email and conducted all 15 interviews via Zoom.

Recommendations

This study was conducted to explore how K-2 teachers promote student engagement in learning. The topic of this study was based, to a large degree, on the lack of existing research relating to specific strategies teachers could implement to increase student engagement. The results of this study are based on the information collected from five K teachers, five 1st grade teachers, and five 2nd grade teachers. There are several recommendations for further research that are supported by this study.

Based on the findings of this current study the first recommendation for future research is to include third grade teachers in a deeper, more comprehensive examination into strategies early childhood teachers can use to improve student engagement. The second recommendation for additional research is to investigate how the use collaborative learning (small groups, partner work, think, pair, share, strategy, and turn and talk) affects student engagement. Finally, an additional recommendation for future research is to investigate how the inclusion of depth of knowledge (DOK) questioning and scaffolding strategies increase student engagement, and related factors including motivation and problem solving skills.

Implications

Student engagement has far-reaching influences on student learning, including retention of information, student academic success, and attitude towards learning and school (Cochran et al., 2017; Fifolt & Morgan, 2019; Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2019). Potential implications for positive social change include increased student engagement in learning due to greater teacher awareness and knowledge about student engagement in learning. Additional potential implications for positive social change may include a deeper understanding of the practices that engage students and improve student academic achievement, noncognitive skills, motivation to learn, and dispositions toward school.

Conclusion

The problem addressed through this basic qualitative study is low levels of engagement in learning exhibited by K-2 students in rural schools located in the southern region of the United States. This study addressed a gap in practice about how K-2

teachers promote student engagement in learning. This study was needed because the lack of student engagement both locally and nationally was identified by researchers as a growing crisis and needed to be examined (Bakhshaee & Hejazi, 2017; Cochran et al., 2017; Hojnoski et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2019).

The 15 participants were interviewed to explore how kindergarten through second grade teachers can promote students' engagement in learning. The reported findings of this study illustrate a wide range of strategies teachers use to increase student engagement. Synthesis of data revealed that teacher utilize the following practices: (a) create a positive learning environments; (b) incorporate active and hands on instructional practices; (c) select activities to meet students' learning styles; (d) integrate small group instruction and vary the group size per activity; (e) reinforce goals of behavior; (f) motivate through various rewards; and (g) provide memory enhancers, clues, signals. All of these strategies help students stay more on task, moving, engaged, and allows them to collaborate with peers.

The teachers of younger students (kindergarten and first grade) referred more to behaviorist theories, whereas the 2nd grade teachers had more responses related to higher level thinking and connecting learning to students' prior knowledge and experiences. Additionally, K-1 teachers utilize more frequent music, movement, and review of procedures. Several also reported changing the activity frequently and taking frequent brain breaks to account for the short attention spans associated with this age group. K-1 teachers also had the most frequent responses related to proximity and moving around the room in an effort to keep students on task. The 2nd grade teachers were more inclined to

provide options, such as student choice boards, promote discovery learning and emphasize that mistakes are proof that one is trying. Additionally, several reported that they provide enrichment and project-based activities and promote peer mentoring. Most teachers stated they complement and reward students who are engaged, show growth, and put forth effort. Other common responses across all three grade levels included differentiating instruction according to student abilities, promoting task completion with fun Friday, and the importance of building relationships. The results of my study filled an identified gap in practice regarding how K-2 teachers promote student engagement in learning. Through this research, I aimed to provide insight and understanding to early childhood education teachers locally and throughout the United States.

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Appendix A: Alignment of Research & Interview Questions & Conceptual Framework

Research Questions 1 & 2: RQ1: How do kindergarten through second grade teachers promote student engagement by incorporating the use of active instructional practices to promote critical thinking and provide a framework about how children best learn, grow, and develop? RQ2: How do kindergarten through second grade teachers promote student engagement by incorporating questioning to gain children's points of view, active or hands on learning, and problem solving skills?	
Conceptual Framework Indicates:	Interview Questions:
Bruner's constructivist theory: Incorporates the use of **active instructional practices** to promote **critical thinking** and **provide a framework** about how children best learn, grow, and develop (see Bruner, 1966).	IQ1: Please tell me about student engagement in your classroom. Prompts: I heard you say…Please give me an example. IQ2: What active instructional practices do you use to promote student engagement? Prompts: I heard you say… Please elaborate. IQ3: How do you promote critical thinking among your student population? Prompts: I heard you say… Please talk to me more about… IQ4: Describe frameworks you provide (eg. graphic organizers) to support children's learning. Prompts: I heard you say… Please elaborate on your most successful approaches.

The ARCS (attention, relevance, confidence, satisfaction) model incorporates questioning to gain **children's points of view**, active or **hands on learning**, and **problem solving skills** (see Julià & Antolí, 2019).	IQ5: What do you do to promote hands on learning? IQ6: Give examples of ways you motivate students by gaining their attention to complete a task. IQ7: What do you do to promote problem solving skills? IQ8: Give examples of questioning strategies you use to gain children's points of view about the relevance of classroom activities. IQ9: Please tell me about methods you use to increase students' levels of confidence and satisfaction. IQ10: Are there any further points you would like to make regarding student engagement in your classroom?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol and Questions

Kindergarten through Second Grade Teachers

Prior to beginning the interview, the researcher will state:

Script

Welcome and thank you for your participation today in this interview. My name is Laura O'Hayer, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University, conducting a study to explore how K-2 teachers promote students' engagement in learning. As a requirement of degree completion, I will be conducting a basic qualitative study with interviews in order to collect data for my study. This interview today will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour and will include several questions regarding your experiences and knowledge relating to student engagement. I would like your permission to digitally record this interview, so I may accurately document the information you share. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recording device or the interview itself, please let me know. Withdrawing from the study will not impact your current relationship with Walden University.

Please confirm that you meet the criteria to participate in the study by answering the following questions about your demographic information:

- What grade do you currently teach?
- How many years teaching experience do you have?
- Please describe the geographic location of the school in which you teach, as well as the size, and demographic make-up of your students.

The data collected from the interviews will be used to develop a better understanding of strategies that can be used to promote student engagement. I am the sole researcher and interviewer for this study. As stated in the written consent form, your responses to the questions will remain confidential. You and I have both signed and dated the form, certifying that we agree to continue this interview. You may keep your copy of the consent form for your records, and I will keep my copy on a password protected computer in a locked room. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop, take a break, or return to a question, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

Interview Questions for Kindergarten through Second Grade Teachers:

IQ1: Please tell me about student engagement in your classroom. Prompts: I heard you say…Please give me an example.

IQ2: What active instructional practices do you use to promote student engagement? Prompts: I heard you say… Please elaborate.

RQ3: How do you promote critical thinking among your student population? Prompts: I heard you say… Please talk to me more about…

RQ4: Describe frameworks you provide (eg. graphic organizers) to support children's learning. Prompts: I heard you say… Please elaborate on your most successful approaches.

IQ5: What do you do to promote hands on learning? Prompts: I heard you say… Please give me an example.

IQ6: Give examples of ways you motivate students by gaining their attention to complete a task. Prompts: I heard you say… Please elaborate.

IQ7: What do you do to promote problem solving skills? Prompt: I heard you say… Please give me an example.

IQ8: Give examples of questioning strategies you use to gain children's points of view about the relevance of classroom activities. Prompt: I heard you say… Please elaborate.

IQ9: Please tell me about methods you use to increase students' levels of confidence and satisfaction. Prompt: I heard you say… Can you tell me more about...?

IQ10: Are there any further points you would like to make regarding student engagement in your classroom? Prompt: I heard you say… Please explain.

Potential Follow-up Questions:

1. Can you tell me more about…?
2. What do you mean by…?
3. Help me understand…?
4. What happened when…?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix C: Second Level Coding

The 71 second level or cycle of codes that emerged were, as follows:

- feel COVID has affected student engagement
- define engagement
- promote student success
- encourage active participation in their learning
- appeal to all learning styles
- discuss expectations
- capitalize on kids being very social
- take frequent brain breaks
- use tactile experiences
- use proximity
- plan for short attentions spans
- change the activity frequently
- provide hands on activities
- move around the room
- plan for more fun
- learn through play
- establish routines/procedures/rules
- classroom management vital
- have high expectations
- give choice - choice boards
- vary group size
- engage in communicating, collaborating, sharing
- use extrinsic reward system/class dojo/extrinsic rewards/treasure box
- promote communication - turn and talk/think, pair, share
- provide, use dry erase boards
- redirect with arm/hand signals
- compliment, reward those who are engaged
- give students recognition
- state purpose/students find purpose
- relate learning to prior knowledge/ connect it to their lives
- build relationships
- promote safe environment
- vary strategies
- engage STEM activities/STEM bends
- build caring relationships
- demonstrate vested interest in their success
- promote friendships/classroom community/positive classroom environment
- transform classroom

- make learning visible
- use engagement chart
- plan for fun Friday
- offer student-led teaching
- differentiate instruction
- use science experiments
- challenge on each student's individual level
- promote peer mentoring
- promote creativity - drama, dance, art, and music
- students "teach" part of the lesson
- request exit tickets
- give positive reinforcement/ congratulate efforts/ celebrate successes
- send positive notes home
- question - open ended, higher level questioning
- use DOK (depth of knowledge) levels
- think outside the box, take chances, risks
- scaffold instruction
- differentiate instruction
- use logical reasoning, higher order, problem solving activities
- provide data notebooks/ highlighters/ clipboards
- offer cues (eg. anchor charts)
- use graphic organizers
- math manipulatives
- use food as manipulatives and fun activities
- set flexible seating
- extend activities
- listen for students' personal interests
- promote discovery learning (mistakes are okay)
- provide enrichment
- design project-based activities
- introduce lesson
- respond to feelings

Appendix D: Coding Table

Themes	Categories	Codes based on common words and phrases
1. Created a positive learning environment	build relationships	feel COVID has affected student engagement and social-emotional well being
	promote student success	define engagement
		promote student success
	classroom community	encourage active participation in their learning
		build relationships
	students feel safe and more willing to take risks	promote safe environment
		build caring relationships
		demonstrate vested interest in their success
		promote friendships/classroom community/positive classroom environment
		transform classroom
		respond to feelings
		Sense of community
		Sharing opinions
		Communicate “I care” & “I am interested”
2. Used active “hands on” instructional practices	Incorporate movement	short attentions spans
		Long day for this age group
	active instructional practices	change the activity frequently
		provide hands on activities
		move around the room/incorporate movement
	fun, games, play	plan for more fun
		learn through play
		science experiments
		Games
		Small group centers
3. Selected activities to meet students’ learning styles	Vary instructional practices	appeal to all learning styles
		take frequent brain breaks
		use tactile experiences
	Implement developmentally appropriate lesson plans and learning activities	use proximity
		vary strategies
		engage STEM activities/STEM bends
		make learning visible
		use engagement chart
	Plan activities to address all learning styles	promote creativity - drama, dance, art, and music
		set flexible seating
		extend activities
		listen for students’ personal interests
		design project-based activities
4. Varied group size per activity	Small group centers	capitalize on kids being very social
		establish routines/procedures/rules
	Collaborate	classroom management vital
		have high expectations
	turn and talk	give choice - choice boards
		vary group size
	think, pair, share	engage in communicating, collaborating, sharing

	promote peer mentoring	promote communication - turn and talk/think, pair, share promote peer mentoring
5. Reinforced goals of behavior	Positive reinforcement celebrate successes Implement and practice structure, routines, and procedures Questioning strategies Differentiate instruction goals of and for behavior	discuss expectations offer student-led teaching differentiate instruction challenge on each student's individual level students "teach" part of the lesson request exit tickets give positive reinforcement/ congratulate efforts/ celebrate successes send positive notes home question – open-ended, higher-level questioning use DOK (depth of knowledge) levels think outside the box, take chances, risks scaffold instruction differentiate instruction use logical reasoning, higher order, problem solving activities promote discovery learning (mistakes are okay) provide enrichment introduce lesson
6. Motivated through various rewards	extrinsic and intrinsic Use various rewards to improve motivation	use extrinsic reward system/class dojo/extrinsic rewards/treasure box compliment, reward those who are engaged give students recognition state purpose/students find purpose relate learning to prior knowledge/ connect it to their lives Fun Friday PBIS school initiative Motivation
7. Provided memory enhancers, clues, signals	Use various manipulatives	Provide and use dry erase boards redirect with arm/hand signals provide data notebooks/ highlighters/ clipboards offer cues (eg. anchor charts) use graphic organizers math manipulatives use food as manipulatives and fun activities

Note. This table displays the codes I established from the interview data and how they were collapsed into categories, then themes.