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Teachers' Perceptions of Academic Performance and Student Engagement Among Ninth-Grade Students

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Abstract

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MA, Walden University, 2009

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Dissertation Submitted in Fulfillment

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Abstract

Lack of academic proficiency in ninth grade is a serious concern because of its associations with subsequent grade retention and dropout risk. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional barriers to student engagement. Self-determination theory provided the interpretative framework for this study. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 10 ninth-grade teachers, observation of teachers' classrooms, and review of archival documents. Results of 6-phase thematic analysis indicated 8 themes: (a) no or little student engagement, (b) lack of support, (c) lack of basic skills, (d) lack of interest in school, (e) different levels and styles of learning, (f) mind-set in relation to performance, (g) disciplinary issues, and (h) belongingness in the classroom. Results confirmed the importance of students receiving support from parents and teachers in developing psycho-social skills to cope with the rigors of high school life. Findings may be used to update teacher training courses to emphasize promoting students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Researchers have characterized the transition to high school based on academic, social, and emotional challenges (Goux, Gurgand, & Maurin, 2016). For at-risk children such as those who have learning difficulties, the transition to high school can be a challenging academic experience (Crosnoe, Smith, & Leventhal, 2015; Goux et al., 2016). Many students face common challenges that can affect their academic performance, which include student-related factors, teacher-related factors, and family-related factors (Alami, 2016; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013; Peters & Woolley, 2015; Zakariya & Bamidele, 2015).

Researchers have identified student engagement as an integral component in the academic success of students (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Lester, 2013; Wang & Peck, 2013). Student engagement is highly relevant in education because of the benefits associated with the concept, such as increased motivation and achievement in students (Lester, 2013). The potential positive social change implication of the study was improved insight about how educators can help their students increase their academic achievement by becoming better prepared to address the challenges of high school.

The chapter is organized into several sections: (a) background, (b) problem statement, (c) purpose of the study, (d) research questions, (e) conceptual framework, (f) nature of the study, (g) definitions, (h) assumptions, (i) scope and delimitations, (j) limitations, and (k) significance of the study. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main ideas central to the identified research problem. The research was focused on

the lack of understanding of teachers' views of student engagement and its possible role in academic achievement.

Background

Many students face the challenging experience of transitioning from middle school to high school, including at-risk children such as those who come from economically disadvantaged families, have learning disabilities, and have behavioral concerns (Crosnoe et al., 2015; Goux et al., 2016). The academic requirements in high school are more demanding compared to middle school, underscoring the importance of having sufficient skills to meet the demands for educational success (Crosnoe et al., 2015). Many underperforming students who wrestle with emotional and academic challenges may drop out shortly after transitioning from middle school to high school (Goux et al., 2016).

Researchers have regarded student engagement as important to students achieving success in academia (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Lester, 2013; Wang & Peck, 2013). Student engagement includes three dimensions that are interrelated: (a) emotional, (b) cognitive, and (c) behavioral (Lee, 2014; Li & Lerner, 2013). The affective or emotional dimension of student engagement pertains to interaction with teachers, school staff, other students, and the school as an institution (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The behavioral dimension of student engagement pertains to the involvement of students in both academic and social activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). The cognitive dimension of student engagement involves the psychological and cognitive thinking of students (Fredrick et al., 2004). According to Li and Lerner (2013), researchers have recognized

the multidimensional nature of student engagement. I analyzed aspects of all three dimensions of student engagement in the study to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students.

This examination of student engagement regarding poor academic performance in high school students was important because of federal mandates (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act, Every Student Succeeds Act) that have required increased accountability related to student performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Teachers can play an important role in the academic engagement and achievement of their students (Košir & Tement, 2014; van Uden, Ritzen, & Pieters, 2014). When teachers recognize their role in their students' overall performances, their behaviors and practices can be instrumental in affecting positive change (Akiri, 2013; van Uden et al., 2014).

Researchers have suggested a relationship exists between student engagement and academic success (Lee, 2014; Weiss & García, 2015). Fostering student engagement is often regarded as a precursor to learning and academic success among students (Lee, 2014). For example, certain aspects of behavioral and emotional engagement may be predictive of achievement in reading performance (Lee, 2014). Additionally, Weiss and García (2015) found that students who have stronger engagement with their schools are more likely to have higher achievement. These studies indicated support for the relationship between academic performance and student engagement, but more research was needed to understand the perspectives of teachers who instructed students who had recently begun high school.

Problem Statement

Lack of academic proficiency in ninth grade is a serious concern because of its associations with subsequent grade retention and dropout risk (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Predictors of poor high school academic performance include low grades and standardized test scores in middle school (Casillas et al., 2012) and health risk behaviors such as drug use, lack of physical activity, and poor dietary habits (Bradley & Greene, 2013). Although researchers have associated many factors with academic performance for high school students, student engagement, which reflects the involvement of the student in activities of learning, is a strong predictor of academic achievement (Al-Alwan, 2014; Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012). Multiple researchers have defined low engagement among eighth, ninth, and tenth grade students as associated with likelihood of dropout by the end of high school (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012).

Researchers have found that student engagement may be modified by interpersonal and environmental phenomena including teachers' instructional style and development of classroom emotional climate (Reeve, 2012; Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). Researchers who addressed teachers' perspectives on the factors that affected low-achieving students' performance appeared limited among transitioning ninth-grade students. This lack of researcher indicated a gap in knowledge regarding how teachers perceived the causes of poor academic proficiency among high school students, specifically regarding the dimensions of student engagement (cognitive, behavioral, and emotional). There was a need to understand not only risk factors for

school failure, but also the underlying reasons for poor academic performance when considering student engagement (Henry et al., 2012; Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012). Qualitative research was useful in exploring perspectives of teachers on how and why ninth grade high school students experienced academic challenges (Glennie, Bonneau, Vandellen, & Dodge, 2012). More research was needed to understand how teachers viewed student engagement and its possible role in academic achievement (Barkaoui et al., 2015). The local evidence of the problem was supported by the low achievement of students in high schools in a school district in the northeastern part of the United States based on the archival data collected from the state Department of Education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers regarding the prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional student engagement. This purpose was addressed through semistructured interviews with 10 ninth-grade teachers, observation of these teachers' classrooms, and review of archival documents. Findings might increase understanding of teachers' perceptions of the underlying reasons for poor academic performance and school failure of ninth-grade students.

Research Questions

To address this study's problem and purpose, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: What are ninth-grade teachers' perspectives on the causes of poor academic performance among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students?

RQ2: What are ninth-grade teachers' perspectives on the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students?

Conceptual Framework

Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) was the guiding framework for the study. One of the key propositions of SDT is that individuals experience heightened motivation to the degree that their basic psychological needs are met; basic psychological needs include competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Competence refers to a person's perception of having the skills and abilities to accomplish a particular task, and autonomy refers to an individual's feeling of control and choice in a given environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness refers to an individual's feelings of meaningful social connectedness with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Reeve (2012) explained that student motivation represented the driving force that lent strength, goal-directedness, and persistence to student behavior. Considered within the SDT framework, student engagement is viewed as an important outcome of motivation because of its robustness as a predictor of academic performance (Reeve, 2012). Self-determination theory is useful for framing exploration of social and environmental factors that promote or thwart need fulfillment, thereby enhancing or diminishing student motivation and engagement (Reeve, 2012).

Nature of the Study

I followed a qualitative exploratory single case design and used semistructured individual interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and archival documents as sources of data. A qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring first-person perspectives of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), as well as the range and variation in perspectives associated with a research topic (Maxwell, 2012). This method was consistent with the purpose of the study, which was to explore the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers regarding the prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional student engagement.

The case study methodology is useful in examining complex processes that occur within bounded systems (Yin, 2013). This approach was useful in exploring teachers' perspectives of the complex processes (i.e., engagement) that have bearing on the academic performance of low-achieving students in ninth grade. Case study methodology is strengthened by one using multiple methods of data collection to support triangulation of study findings (Yin, 2013). I used semistructured individual interviews with teachers, classroom observation, and archival document analysis as data collection methods.

Definitions

The following key terms in the study are defined in this section:

Academic achievement: Academic achievement pertains to the demonstration of knowledge or learning through scores on tests (Ickovics et al., 2014).

Affective dimension of student engagement: The affective or emotional dimension of student engagement refers to interaction with teachers, school staff, other students, and the school as an institution (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Behavioral dimension of student engagement: The behavioral dimension of student engagement pertains to the involvement of students in both academic and social activities (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Cognitive dimension of student engagement: The cognitive dimension of student engagement involves both a psychological and cognitive component (Fredrick et al., 2004).

Student engagement: Student engagement is a dynamic concept that involves "social and psychological constructs as well as a synergistic process" (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 432).

Teacher-student relationship: Teacher-student relationship refers to the nature of the interaction between teachers and students during classroom instruction (Liu, Li, Chen, & Qu, 2015).

Assumptions

The first assumption was that the responses of the ninth-grade teachers during the interviews would be honest and reflective of their true perceptions about the causes of poor academic performance among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students and the role of student engagement in their academic achievement. To encourage candid and honest discussion during the individual interview, I gave participants enough time to

think and talk at their own pace. I also reminded the participants that their answers and comments to every question would remain confidential.

Another assumption of the study was that using several data sources was instrumental in the creation of an in-depth narrative to capture the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers regarding student engagement and the causes of poor academic performance. Using multiple sources of data is one of the defining features of case study research (Yin, 2013). Supported by Yin's (2013) view of using multiple tools in case study research, I assumed that data collected from interviews, classroom observations, and archival documents would be adequate for this study.

Scope and Delimitations

The first delimitation of the study was the focus on academic performance and engagement of ninth-grade students. The study focused on the ninth-grade level because the transition from middle school to high school can be challenging for many students (Longobardi, Prino, Marengo, & Settanni, 2016; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014). Longobardi et al. (2016) characterized the transition from middle to high school based on behavioral, social, and emotional changes. Though high school is challenging for many, the most critical stage is ninth-grade.

Another delimitation of the study was that the participants would include only teachers. When classroom observations were conducted, the focus was on the instructional practices and behaviors of the teachers. The decision to exclude students in the target population was influenced by the stringent process involved in using children

as participants in a study. Conducting the research from the perspectives of teachers was sufficient in answering the two research questions.

Limitations

The first limitation of the study was the results could not be generalized to all ninth-grade teachers in the United States because of the small sample size and the deliberate disregard for using strategies to control for confounding variables. Despite the lack of generalizability, the in-depth narrative that was expected in this study might be transferable to other school districts with similar student demographics and state policies. I described the research context so that the results would be more readily transferable.

Another limitation of the study was that a direct cause-and-effect conclusion could not be made regarding the relationship between academic performance and student engagement among ninth-grade students. I relied on the perspectives of teachers supported by classroom observations and archival records. Despite this methodological limitation, the results of the study were expected to be more in-depth and descriptive compared to findings reported in quantitative studies.

Significance

This study's findings contributed to the literature by addressing teachers' perspectives on the reasons for low achievement in their nonproficient students. Although risk factors for poor performance and high school dropout were identified in the literature, and student engagement was identified as a predictor of academic performance, no research was located in which teachers provided their perspectives on engagement and other possible causes of performance problems among ninth-grade students. The findings

may provide insights that increase understanding of how engagement or lack of engagement relate to performance problems in low-achieving students.

The findings of this study may be helpful for leadership designing school policies or practices to address the specific needs of low-achieving ninth-grade students. Through changes to school policies or practices, this study may contribute to positive social change by contributing to school interventions that increase engagement for at-risk ninth-grade high school students, thereby increasing their chances of academic success and graduation.

Summary

Research on teachers' perspectives regarding the factors that affect low-achieving ninth-grade students' performance was not found in the research literature, creating a gap in knowledge on the role of student engagement on academic performance. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers regarding the prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional student engagement. This study's findings contributed to the literature by addressing teachers' perspectives regarding the reasons for low achievement in their nonproficient students. The findings may be helpful for leadership designing school policies or practices to address the needs of low-achieving ninth-grade students.

In the next chapter, I review the relevant literature on academic performance and student engagement. The key topics that are discussed in the literature review include self-determination theory, the experiences and challenges of ninth-grade students, causes

of poor academic achievement, dimensions of student engagement, the role of teachers in the academic performance of their students, and the relationship between student engagement and academic performance. The gap in the literature is also identified in the summary and conclusion section of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Researchers have posited the transition from middle school to high school as a difficult and challenging experience for many students (Roybal et al., 2014). Without support from teachers, parents, and leaders, at-risk children transitioning to Grade 9 may face challenges that can affect their academic performances (Crosnoe et al., 2015; Roybal et al., 2014). Addressing this research problem, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers regarding the prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional student engagement.

In this chapter, I present a literature review to clarify the problem identified in the introduction. I trace the literature on student engagement and academic performance to justify the gap in the professional knowledge. The major sections of the literature review include the following: (a) literature search strategy, (b) the self-determination theory as the study's conceptual framework, (c) key themes and topics related to student engagement and academic performance, and (d) summary and conclusions of the most important information gained from the review. The chapter also includes a short transition to Chapter 3.

Literature Search Strategy

All of the literature that was included in this review came from online databases. The scholarly resources included Google Scholar, ERIC: Educational Resource Information Center, Journal Seek, JSTOR: Journal Storage, and Psych Info. Most of the

references selected for the literature review came from peer-reviewed journals published between 2013 and 2017.

The key terms that were used to search for relevant literature included the following: *self-determination*, *self-determination theory*, *ninth grade high school students*, *Grade 9 students*, *challenges of freshman high students*, *transition to high school*, *student engagement*, *school engagement*, *emotional engagement*, *cognitive engagement*, *behavioral engagement*, *academic performance*, *academic achievement, academic success*, and *academic performance*. These key terms and phrases were used to organize and write the literature review.

Based on the results of the literature review search strategy, I found 70 references. The references included (a) chapters in a book, (b) peer-reviewed articles, and (c) websites. Table 1 provides a summary of the results of the literature search.

Table 1

Summary of the Literature Review Sources

Data source	Year of publication	Number of sources
Chapters in books	2013-2017	3
Peer-reviewed articles	2013-2017	53
Peer-reviewed articles	2012 and older	13
Websites	2015	1
Total		70

Conceptual Framework

The premises that contributed to the guiding conceptual framework for the study were based on Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory. One of the key propositions of self-determination theory is that individuals experience heightened

motivation to the degree that their basic psychological needs are met; basic psychological needs include competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Competence refers to a person's perception of having the skills and abilities to accomplish a particular task, and autonomy refers to an individual's feeling of control and choice in a given environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness refers to an individual's feelings of meaningful social connectedness with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These three psychological needs are interrelated because the fulfillment of one need promotes the fulfillment of another need.

Researchers have used self-determination theory to emphasize the importance of natural tendency for growth and fulfillment of the three main psychological needs of individuals: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Individuals are active agents evolving to create a coherent sense of self. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), the natural tendencies of individuals for growth do not operate automatically because ongoing social support is necessary. The social context can be instrumental in the encouragement or discouragement of natural tendencies of individuals for psychological growth and fulfillment. Self-determination theory underscores the importance of understanding the interplay between individuals and the social context to predict behaviors and development.

Reeve (2012) explained that student motivation represented the driving force that lent strength, goal-directedness, and persistence to student behavior. Considered within the framework of self-determination theory, student engagement is an important outcome of motivation because of its robustness as a predictor of academic performance (Reeve,

2012). A researcher can use self-determination theory to frame the exploration of social and environmental factors that promote or discourage need fulfillment, thereby enhancing or diminishing the motivation and students' engagement (Reeve, 2012).

Researchers have used self-determination theory to explain academic achievement (León, Núñez, & Liew, 2015; Taylor et al., 2014; Zheng, Gaumer Erickson, Kingston, & Noonan, 2014). Researchers have viewed self-determination theory regarding intrinsic motivation as a determinant of academic achievement (Taylor et al., 2014). According to Zheng et al. (2014), skills relevant to self-determination theory include empowerment, quality of life and class participation, and self-concept. Among at-risk children such as those with learning difficulties, researchers have found that self-determination can predict academic achievement (Erickson, Noonan, Zheng, & Brussow, 2015; Zheng et al., 2014). Adolescents with learning disabilities can use self-determination skills to improve their productivity and organization in school, leading to enhancements in their academic achievement (Erickson et al., 2015).

Researchers have adopted self-determination theory as a framework to understand and explain student engagement (Bourgeois & Boberg, 2016; Goldman, Goodboy, & Weber, 2016; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2016). For example, Jang et al. (2016) used self-determination theory to understand why some students became engaged or disengaged toward a semester-long class. Jang et al. found that rising engagement was more likely to occur when a perception existed among students that their teachers were autonomously supportive. Conversely, Jang et al. found disengagement was more likely to occur when there was a perception that their teachers were controlling. Goldman et al. (2016) also

used self-determination theory to explain intrinsic motivation regarding the satisfaction of a basic psychological need.

Self-determination theory was a relevant framework to understand student engagement and academic performances among ninth-grade students (Bourgeois & Boberg, 2016; Goldman et al., 2016; Jang et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2014: Zheng et al., 2014). Researchers have used self-determination theory to understand how the fulfillment of psychological needs such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness can influence academic achievement and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Intrinsic motivation is a relevant determinant of academic achievement and engagement (Jang et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2014).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

In this section, several key topics regarding student engagement and academic performance are discussed. The first topic focuses on the experiences of ninth-grade students as first-year students in high school. The second topic is the causes of poor academic achievement. The third section of the literature review focuses on student engagement, including the concept's different dimensions and the factors that encourage engagement. The fourth section of the literature review focuses on the role of teachers in the academic performance of their students. The fifth and final section of the literature review focuses on the relationship between student engagement and academic performance.

Experiences of Ninth-Grade Students

Researchers have defined transitioning to high school from middle school as a critical developmental period for students (Longobardi et al., 2016; Roybal et al., 2014). According to Roybal et al. (2014), "the environment, expectations, structure, and culture" (p. 475) of middle school are not the same as high school, thereby contributing to the high failing rate of first-year high school students. Longobardi et al. (2016) characterized the transition from middle to high school based on distinctive stages including but not limited to behavioral, social, and emotional changes. Given the expected changes and adjustments, the transition to high school is one of the most critical developmental phases that students face (Longobardi et al., 2016).

At-risk children are susceptible to experiencing academic challenges when undergoing the transition from middle school to high school (Crosnoe et al., 2015). At-risk children include students who come from economically disadvantaged families, have learning disabilities or difficulties, and have behavioral and social problems such as attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (Crosnoe et al., 2015; Goux et al., 2016). These at-risk-children experience challenges beyond what an average student may encounter transitioning to high school because of the preexisting circumstances that exacerbate the educational and developmental transition (Longobardi et al., 2016). Because of the emotional and academic challenges involved in transitioning from middle school to high school, dropout is a common phenomenon, particularly among low-achieving students (Goux et al., 2016). Without the transitional support from teachers and

parents, at-risk children are more likely to drop out from high school (Goux et al., 2016; Ricard & Pelletier, 2016).

Causes of Poor Academic Performance

Poor academic performance of students is a major concern for teachers, curriculum developers, and school leaders (Alami, 2016). Researchers have examined the possible causes of poor academic performance among students (Alami, 2016; Ickovics et al., 2014; Peters & Woolley, 2015; Zakariya & Bamidele, 2015). The findings from these studies are presented in this section of the literature review.

Peters and Woolley (2015) tested a model of environmental risk and protective factors in predicting the academic success of middle school and high school students. Environmental risk and protective factors were operationalized regarding control, support, and challenge. Peters and Woolley collected data from 19,228 students who were organized regarding the three broad risk and protective categories. The results of the multiple regression analyses indicated that higher control and support predicted higher academic success among students, with support responsible for the variance between students reporting low and high control. Additionally, the results indicated that a higher challenge score predicted higher academic success among students, with adequate control responsible for the variance between students reporting high levels of support and low levels of support. Based on these findings, students were more likely to have poor academic achievement when control, support, and challenge were low. Students in the sample included middle school and high school students, which was beyond the target population of ninth-grade students in the current study.

Zakariya and Bamidele (2015) examined the possible causes of poor academic performance in mathematics among undergraduate students in Nigeria. The design was descriptive *ex post facto* and the sample involved the random selection of second-year students. Data were collected using questionnaires, which were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results indicated that poor infrastructure, emotional difficulties, and weak background in mathematics were the causes of poor academic achievement. Limitations of this study were that the sample consisted of undergraduate students in Nigeria, which might not be applicable to ninth-grade students in the United States.

Alami (2016) examined the possible causes of poor academic achievement among students in Oman. Data collection involved essays from 151 undergraduate students from the Salalah College of Technology. The results of the qualitative analysis showed that poor academic performance could be explained using four broad factors: (a) student-related factors; (b) teacher-related factors; (c) family-related factors; and (d) extraneous factors such as health and transportation. The findings indicated that student-related factors such as studying habits, attendance, and motivation were the most significant predictors of academic performance. Conversely, teacher-related factors such as level of competence, behaviors, or instructional approach were the least significant predictors of academic performance. Limitations of this study were that the sample consisted of undergraduate students in Oman, which might not be applicable to ninth-grade students in the United States.

De Castella, Byrne, and Covington (2013) examined students' success orientation, fear of failure, and disengagement across different cultures. Success orientation reflected

an approach toward learning and academic achievement that emphasized proficiency and performance. Fear of failure reflected an approach toward school that emphasized concerns about embarrassment, shame, disappointing others, and an uncertain future. De Castella et al. found that students who reported high fear of failure were more likely to use defensive and pessimistic strategies. When a fear of failure orientation was combined with low motivation, students were more likely to report disengagement and low academic performance.

Fall and Roberts (2012) investigated the relationships between students' social contexts, school engagement, academic self-perceptions, and academic performance as predictors of school dropout. Fall and Roberts found that social context, as indicated by student perceptions of parent and teacher support, predicted the students' self-perceptions of perceived control and identification with school. Self-perceptions may predict engagement and academic achievement. Fall and Roberts found a negative relationship between engagement and likelihood of dropout by 12th grade. One limitation was that Fall and Roberts focused on the perceptions of students, which might not be the same as the perceptions of teachers.

Collie, Martin, Malmberg, Hall, and Ginns (2015) examined the role of control in the relationship between academic buoyancy and student academic achievement. Buoyancy referred to the student's self-perceived ability to cope with and succeed despite adversity in their school experiences; control referred to students' perceptions of their control over future academic outcomes. The researchers relate buoyancy to achievement, and control linked these variables. Findings indicated a cyclical relationship between

these variables, as past achievement and/or management of adversity increased self-perceived control, thereby influencing future academic success and higher buoyancy. Collie et al. focused on the unique perceptions of students, which might not be applicable to teachers' perceptions.

Abu-Hamour and Al-Hmouz (2013) compared high, moderate, and low achievers in mathematics. Abu-Hamour and Al-Hmouz correlated higher levels of achievement with more positive attitudes toward school and teachers, higher levels of self-regulation, and higher levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Similarly, Helle, Laakkonen, Tuijula, and Vermunt (2013) found that self-regulation predicted the academic performance of students.

Bilge, Tuzgol Dost, and Cetin (2014) studied 605 Turkish high school students. Participants reported low self-efficacy and were more likely to report higher levels of burnout. Additionally, students who reported poorer study habits and lower levels of self-efficacy similarly reported higher levels of cynicism, which Bilge et al. associated with burnout. Komarraju and Nadler (2013) found that students who reported high self-efficacy were more likely to view intelligence as changeable through effort. Participants with higher self-efficacy had superior academic performance, and they reported higher levels of motivation. Similarly, Yeager et al. (2014) found that students who received the incremental theory of personality (belief that personality could change) intervention reported better academic performance over the following school year, thereby having emotional, health, and academic benefits.

Casillas et al. (2012) examined factors to predict school failure in high school, using a sample of 4,660 middle school students at 24 different schools. Results indicated that the strongest predictors of high school failure were lower middle school grades and standardized test scores. However, the researchers found motivation, self-regulation, social control, time spent on homework, and time spent on media predicted early high school performance, although not as strongly as prior academic performance and test scores.

To summarize and conclude the review in this section, the literature indicated that various factors could influence academic performance, such as self-efficacy, burnout, interpersonal relationships, student-related factors, teacher related factors, and family-related factors (Alami, 2016; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013; Peters & Woolley, 2015; Zakariya & Bamidele, 2015). The main limitation of the studies was that none focused on the causes of poor academic achievement among ninth-grade students. The causes of poor academic performance for middle school and undergraduate students might not be applicable to transitioning ninth-grade students. Another relevant limitation was that most of the studies focused on students' perceptions regarding the causes of poor achievement. Students' perceptions might not be similar to teachers' perceptions regarding the causes of poor achievement because of the unique insights of teachers as educators.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is highly relevant in education due to benefits from increased motivation and achievement in students (Lester, 2013; Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015). Despite student engagement popularity, researchers have stated they cannot

characterize student engagement by a single feature (Barkaoui et al., 2015; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Sinatra et al., 2015). Student engagement is a dynamic concept that involves "social and psychological constructs as well as a synergistic process" (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 432). Researchers have faced difficulty in generating a single definition to capture the complete essence of student engagement (Barkaoui et al., 2015).

Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, and Kindermann (2008) expressed a need to understand student engagement to enhance precision in research. The controversy from conceptualizing student engagement primarily involves defining the key features (Skinner et al., 2008). Sinatra et al. (2015) characterized student engagement as a continuum ranging from person-centered to context-centered influences.

In defining student engagement through qualitative study, Barkaoui et al. (2015) explored how teachers and administrators of three low-achieving schools defined student engagement and perceived the factors that affected and facilitated student engagement. The sample consisted of 16 teachers and administrators in two separate focus group discussions. The results of the data analysis indicated teachers conceived student engagement as influential in their work. The participants believed student engagement was a "symptom displayed by individuals, but the roots of engagement lay elsewhere" (Barkaoui et al., 2015, p. 80). The results of the analysis showed perceived strategies to enhance student engagement. These included improvement teacher-student relationship, incorporation of extracurricular activities into the classroom, and teachers' abilities to show engagement in their teaching materials.

Wang and Peck (2013) identified subtypes of engagement or engagement profiles, as based on students' patterns of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. Wang and Peck identified five engagement profiles: highly engaged, moderately engaged, minimally engaged, cognitively disengaged, and emotionally disengaged. Minimally engaged students, who reported low engagement across all three dimensions, had the lowest GPAs, lowest educational aspirations, and the highest risk of dropout. These findings indicated that student engagement that needed further empirical exploration. Building on these studies, the next subsection will include the dimensions of student engagement—cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Lam et al., 2014; Lee, 2014).

Dimensions of student engagement. Researchers have found several dimensions or components in student engagement (Chase, Hilliard, Geldhof, Warren, & Lerner, 2014; Lam et al., 2014; Lee, 2014). Researchers have operationalized student engagement as including affective/emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions (Chase et al., 2014; Lam et al., 2014; Lee, 2014; Li & Lerner, 2013). Li and Lerner (2013) recognized the multi-dimensionality of student engagement, but they stated the interrelationship was primarily unexplored.

The affective or emotional dimension of student engagement pertains to interaction with teachers, school staff, other students, and the school as an institution (Fredricks et al., 2004). This dimension of engagement highlights the importance of having ties with the school, which manifest from students' attitudes and values. The components of emotional engagement include affective reactions (happiness, sadness, and anxiety), emotional reactions (positive or negative feelings toward the institution and

their teachers), and school identification (having a sense of belongingness with the institution).

The behavioral dimension of student engagement pertains to students' involvement in academic and social activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). This dimension has three main categories: positive conduct, participation in school activities, and involvement in learning. Positive conduct means one following rules and policies in school. Involvement in learning means one concentrating while performing tasks, holding attention to learn, persisting and exerting sustained effort, asking questions, and participating in class discussion. Regarding involvement in school related activities, these may include one participating in sports or being active in school council.

The cognitive dimension of student engagement involves psychological and cognitive components (Fredrick et al., 2004). Psychologically, people want to learn; therefore, they want to understand and learn complex ideas and skills. Cognitively, people engage in self-regulated learning and strategic thinking, while applying these skills to their lives.

Researchers have addressed the gap in the literature about the lack of understanding concerning the interrelationship of the three dimensions of engagement (Li & Lerner, 2013; Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2014). Addressing the multidimensionality of student engagement, Li and Lerner (2013) examined the interrelationship of three dimensions of student engagement among adolescent high school students. Li and Lerner used an autoregressive lagged effects model. The results indicated that both behavioral and emotional dimensions were mutually related with each other. Additionally, the

findings indicated the behavioral dimension of student engagement predicted cognitive engagement, but the same results did not yield significant values when the direction of the variables was reversed. Li and Lerner showed the multidimensional nature of student engagement; therefore, they stated the need for a more precise definition to prevent confusion and lack of accuracy.

Pietarinen et al. (2014) examined the interrelationship of two engagement dimensions—emotional and cognitive engagement—and the mediating role in school achievement. The three case studies involved 170 students who answered survey questionnaires. The results of the structural equation modeling analysis indicated the cognitive students' engagement was highly dependent on the interplay of the environment and students. Moreover, both emotional and cognitive engagement were mediated by students' well-being, which all contributed to academic success. These findings indicated the interrelation between cognitive and emotional engagement in predicting academic success.

Factors that influence student engagement. Past research has indicated student engagement could be influenced by various factors (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; Lester, 2013; Mazer, 2013; Shernoff et al., 2006; Sweat, Jones, Han, & Wolfgram, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2013). These factors include the well-being of students, school environment, quality of learning, individual motivation, parental involvement, and instructional practices and behaviors of teachers (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; Lester, 2013; Mazer, 2013; Shernoff et al., 2006; Wang & Eccles, 2013). These factors are further discussed in

this section by focusing on specific research studies to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses.

Heffner and Antaramian (2016) conducted a quantitative examination of how subjective well-being operationalized life satisfaction predicting student engagement for middle school students. The results indicated life satisfaction predicted student engagement and academic achievement, with gender acting as a moderator. The predictive significance of life satisfaction on student engagement was incremental over affective states. The study was limited by focusing on middle school students, which might not apply to ninth-grade students.

Wang and Eccles (2013) conducted a longitudinal study of the factors that influenced student engagement using a multidimensional approach. School environment factors in the analysis included structural support, provision of choice, relevance of teaching, and emotional support from teachers and classmates. School engagement was operationalized in three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. The participants included 1,157 adolescents from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The results indicated that school environment predicted engagement through the partial or full mediation of motivation; therefore, motivation could be an important component of all three dimensions. Students' perceptions of school environment influenced their motivation for achievement, which influenced cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement.

Mazer (2013) conducted a quantitative study of the effects of teacher communication behaviors on 518 undergraduate students' engagement; they answered a

survey questionnaire. The results indicated immediacy of teachers was the strongest predictor of student engagement regarding emotional interest, but teacher clarity was the strongest predictor of student engagement regarding cognitive interest. Regarding the interaction effect of the variables, Mazer found that an interaction effect occurred between the immediacy and clarity of teachers' behaviors and cognitive dimensions of student engagement. An interaction effect occurred between emotional and cognitive dimensions of student engagement. The findings indicated the importance of teachers' behaviors and practices in predicting students' emotional and cognitive engagement. However, the sample consisted of undergraduate students, which might not apply to transitioning ninth-grade high school students.

The quality of learning environment can also affect the level of students' engagement (Shernoff et al., 2006). Shernoff et al. (2006) stated a complex learning environment can indicate classroom self-esteem and student engagement in learning. Shernoff et al. (2006) defined environmental complexity as the "simultaneous presence of environmental challenge and environmental support" (p. 52).

Parental involvement can also predict student engagement. Al-Alwan (2014) examined relationships among parental involvement, student engagement, academic performance, parental involvement enhanced engagement, and student engagement influenced student achievement. Al-Alwan found academic achievement was influenced by student engagement with school (behavioral, cognitive, and emotional). Parental involvement had a direct influence on student engagement. Parental involvement

indirectly influenced achievement performance through the mediating variable of school engagement.

Wang and Eccles (2012) examined the relationships between different types of social support and expressions of school engagement, including how these relationships changed over time from middle school through high school. Wang and Eccles measured school engagement through self-report; they found four dimensions: school compliance, extracurricular activity participation, school identification, and subjective valuing of learning. Measures of perceived social support reflected teacher support, parental support, and peer support. Wang and Eccles used standardized test scores to measure academic achievement. They found all four dimensions of engagement declined over the 4-year period, and different types of social support were significantly related to different dimensions of engagement. Wang and Eccles associated teacher support with less decline in school identification, school compliance, and subjective valuing of school over time; these dimensions reflected cognitive and emotional engagement, which were more strongly influenced by teacher support compared to peer support.

Bilge et al. (2014) examined burnout and engagement levels in high school students' self-efficacy beliefs, academic success, and study habits. Participants who reported low self-efficacy were more likely to report higher levels of burnout. Participants who reported better study habits and high self-efficacy were more likely to report higher levels of engagement. Additionally, students who reported poorer study habits and lower levels of self-efficacy similarly reported higher levels of cynicism, which Bilge et al. associated with burnout.

Park, Holloway, Arendtsz, Bempechat, and Li (2012) investigated the relationship between psychological need fulfillment and emotional engagement among low socioeconomic status (SES) students. Student's emotional engagement fluctuated over time and across settings; moreover, higher levels of engagement occurred due to meeting needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Park et al. related need fulfillment for autonomy to emotional engagement. The relationships between need fulfillment and engagement remained when Park et al. controlled the variables of gender, racial background, and academic achievement level.

Henry et al. (2012) investigated the relationship between poor school engagement or school disengagement and subsequent outcomes, such as school dropout, delinquent behavior, and substance use among adolescent students. They defined poor school engagement as a significant predictor of dropout by 12th grade. Henry et al. associated school disengagement in seventh and eighth grade with substance use and criminal or delinquent behavior throughout adolescence and into early adulthood. In another study of early risk factors for dropout, Quiroga, Janosz, Bisset, and Morin (2013) found that depression in seventh grade was a significant predictor of dropout; additionally, poor self-perceptions of academic competence mediated the relationship between depression and school dropout.

Section summary and conclusion. Previous researchers have agreed that student engagement is a dynamic concept related to student success (Barkaoui et al., 2015; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Li & Lerner, 2013; Pietarinen et al., 2014). Researchers have defined student engagement as having three dimensions: (a) cognitive, (b) emotional, and

(c) behavioral (Fredrick et al., 2004). Researchers have considered these three dimensions as interrelated (Li & Lerner, 2013; Pietarinen et al., 2014).

Some factors that show student engagement include the well-being of students, school environment, quality of learning, individual motivation, and instructional practices and behaviors of teachers (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; Lester, 2013; Mazer, 2013; Shernoff et al., 2006; Wang & Eccles, 2013). However, no studies focused on student engagement among ninth-grade students. The factors that predicted student engagement among middle school and undergraduate students might not apply to transitioning ninth-grade students.

Role of Teachers in Student Achievement and Engagement

Teachers can play an important role in the academic engagement and achievement of their students (De Laet et al., 2016; Košir & Tement, 2014; Liu et al., 2015; van Uden et al., 2014; Wubbels, Brekelmans, Mainhard, den Brok, & van Tartwijk, 2016). Wubbels et al. (2016) stated teachers should encourage students' natural tendency for growth and fulfill their psychological needs to influence academic achievement. Regarding engagement, the teacher-student relationship also supports student engagement (De Laet et al., 2016).

Wubbels et al. (2016) defined relatedness as the psychological need most relevant teachers' roles in enhancing their students' academic performances. The teacher-student relationship is important during periods of transition for students from middle to high school (Akiri, 2013; Longobardi et al., 2016). A positive teacher-student relationship can

be a protective factor to help transitioning students achieve success in high school (Longobardi et al., 2016).

Longobardi et al. (2016) examined the effects of the quality of teacher-student relationship on the academic achievement of first-year high school students. The sample consisted of 122 participants, with 55% comprising of female students. Data were collected using self-report survey questionnaires, which were filled out twice: (a) once in their eighth grade and (b) once during their first year in high school. The results of the regression analysis indicated the quality of perceived teacher-student relationship significantly predicted the academic achievement of first-year high school students. Specifically, the higher the perceived closeness between teachers and students, the higher the increase in the academic achievement of students. This study showed the significance of teachers building positive relationships with their students to enhance achievement.

Akiri (2013) conducted a descriptive study to examine the effects of the effectiveness of teachers on students' academic performances. The sample consisted of 300 teachers and their 1,690 students in Nigeria. Data for the academic performance of students were derived from records and scores, whereas the effectiveness of teachers was derived from questionnaires and rating scales. Data were analyzed using correlation, *t*-test, and single factor analysis of variance. The results indicated teachers who were more effective with instruction led to better-performing students. However, the results also showed that teachers' instructional effectiveness was not the only determinant of academic performance; Akiri posited other environmental factors could also be significant.

Košir and Tement (2014) examined three competing models to assess the directionality of teacher-student relationships on the academic achievement of elementary and secondary grade students in Slovenia. The sample consisted of 816 students from three different grade levels with data collected from the beginning and end of the school year. The results of the structural equation modeling analysis and the cross-lagged panel correlation technique indicated that a reciprocal relationship occurred between teacher acceptance and academic achievement, with student-perceived teacher personal support as a bidirectional mediator of this relationship. The relevant limitations of this study were that Košir and Tement did not focus on ninth-grade students, which was consistent with the findings of the researchers that age influenced achievement and teacher-student relationship.

Focusing on the role of teachers in the students' engagement, other researchers have shown support for the relationship between the two concepts (De Laet et al.., 2016; Mazer, 2013; van Uden et al., 2014). Mazer (2013) supported the predictive significance of teacher behaviors on the cognitive and emotional dimensions of engagement. De Laet et al. (2016) supported the predictive significance of teacher-student relationship regarding the behavioral dimension of student engagement. Van Uden et al. (2014) indicated all three dimensions of student engagement were predicted by teacher beliefs and perceived interpersonal behaviors of teachers.

De Laet et al. (2016) examined how teacher-student relationships, as perceived by students, was related to behavioral engagement. Data were based on a 3-year longitudinal record involving 1,111 adolescent students, whose mean age was 13.79. The results of

the cross-lagged analysis indicated that students who exhibited more behavioral problems and less behavioral engagement had increased dissatisfaction with their teachers, thereby leading to an increase in issues with adjusting in class. The results indicated a positive relationship between students and teacher could lead to positive student behavioral engagement. These findings showed the important role that teachers had in influencing their students' behavioral engagement. Researchers defined student engagement as multidimensional; however, De Laet et al. focused on the behavioral dimension of engagement.

Also focusing on the role of teachers in fostering student engagement, van Uden et al. (2014) examined how teacher beliefs and perceived interpersonal behaviors of teachers were related to the three dimension of student engagement—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. The sample consisted of 200 teachers and 2,288 students who answered survey questionnaires. The results indicated the strongest correlations occurred between the perceived interpersonal behaviors of teachers and all three dimensions of student engagement. The age of students and their student engagement were not correlated. These findings indicated the importance of teacher variables, such as their beliefs and interpersonal behaviors in predicting student engagement.

The literature has defined the teacher-student relationship as an important factor in engagement and achievement (Akiri, 2013; De Laet et al., 2016; Košir & Tement, 2014; van Uden et al., 2014; Wubbels et al., 2016). However, most adopted a quantitative research approach and did not incorporate the in-depth teachers' perspectives. Most

samples did not involve ninth-grade students, which were the target population for this study.

Connection Between Student Engagement and Academic Performance

Researchers have cited engagement as an important theoretical and practical factor that influences academic success (Chase et al., 2014). Fostering student engagement is important due to the positive effects on children's learning and academic performances (Chase et al., 2014; Bakker, Vergel, & Kuntze, 2015; Lee, 2014). Regardless of personal resources and ability, engagement is a mediator that influences the students' academic performances (Bakker et al., 2015).

Researchers have shown the relationship between student engagement and academic performance (Chase et al., 2014; Lee, 2014; Weiss & García, 2015). Lee (2014) examined the relationship between student engagement and academic performance using data from the U.S. Program for International Student Assessment. The sample consisted of 3,268 15-year-old students in 121 different schools in the United States. The results of the multilevel analysis indicated that behavioral engagement regarding showing effort and perseverance to learn was a significant predictor of performance in reading. The results showed that emotional engagement and sense of belonging predicted reading performance of students. Behavioral engagement acted as a partial mediator of the relationship between emotional engagement and reading performance.

Weiss and García (2015) examined the relationship between student engagement and academic achievement; they operationalized engagement based on teacher engagement and school engagement. The sample involved 15-year-old students in

Mexico. The results of the hierarchical linear model analysis indicated that regardless of socioeconomic status or family composition, students with stronger engagements to their schools were more likely to have higher achievement. However, teacher-based engagement did not lead to improvements in student achievement. The implication of the findings was that student engagement might not be regarded as a single concept, as evidenced by the significance of school-based engagement in predicting achievement but not teacher-based engagement. The sample only consisted of Mexican students, and Weiss and García could not provide a more in-depth explanation for the mechanisms involved in the findings due to the quantitative nature of the study.

Chase et al. (2014) used three dimensions of student engagement—affective, behavioral, and cognitive—to examine the reciprocal relationship with academic performance among 710 high school students in a youth development program. The results of the longitudinal confirmatory factor analysis indicated variability occurred among the three dimensions when examined with academic success. The results of the structural equation model analysis indicated a mutually predictive relationship between engagement and academic success, but there was variability regarding grade level. The implication of this finding was that the relationship between engagement and academic success might be moderated by grade level. However, the sample consisted of sophomore to senior high school students, which did not align with this study's focus on ninth-grade students' academic performances.

Lein et al. (2016) examined the relationship between student engagement and seventh graders' mathematical problem-solving performances. Student engagement was

operationalized regarding on-task behaviors; therefore, prior academic achievement on mathematics was controlled. The results indicated engagement predicted performance in mathematics problem-solving, even after their prior achievement was controlled. These findings indicated support for the relationship between student engagement and academic performance. However, the sample only consisted of seventh-grade students, which might not be generalized to other ninth-grade students.

Green et al. (2012) tested three models of relationships among student engagement, academic performance, student motivation, and student self-concept. The model with the best fit indicated that students' academic self-concept and motivation predicted positive attitudes toward school, which predicted homework completion and class participation (two indicators of engagement) and negatively predicted the frequency of absenteeism. Academic performance was positively predicted by homework completion and class participation, and it was negatively predicted by frequency of absences.

Reyes et al. (2012) examined the relationship between the classroom's emotional climate and students' academic performance, considering the mediating variable of student engagement. Classroom emotional climate was conceptualized as (a) teachers were sensitive to the needs of students, (b) relationships between teachers and students were warm and congenial, (c) teachers took students' views and opinions seriously, and (d) teachers avoided using sarcasm and harsh punitive actions toward students. Reyes et al. positively associated classroom emotional climate with academic performance, and this relationship was mediated by engagement.

Engagement is an important theoretical and practical factor that influences academic success (Bakker et al., 2015; Chase et al., 2014). The literature has indicated support for the connection between student engagement and academic performance (Bakker et al., 2015; Chase et al., 2014; Lein et al., 2016; Reyes et al., 2012; Weiss & García, 2015). A relevant limitation of the studies reviewed in this section was that the samples did not involve first-year students, which did not align with this study's focus on ninth-grade students' academic performances.

Summary and Conclusions

The transition from middle school to high school can be a challenging experience for many students, particularly for at-risk children in economically disadvantaged families, with learning disabilities and behavioral concerns (Crosnoe et al., 2015; Goux et al., 2016; Longobardi et al., 2016; Roybal et al., 2014). Because of the emotional and academic challenges from transitioning from middle school to high school, dropout is a common phenomenon, particularly among low-achieving students (Goux et al., 2016). Students face student-related factors, teacher-related factors, and family-related factors, which can influence their academic performance (Alami, 2016; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013; Peters & Woolley, 2015; Zakariya & Bamidele, 2015).

Researchers have proposed student engagement works as an integral component of academic success (Barkaoui et al., 2015; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Lester, 2013; Sinatra et al., 2015; Wang & Peck, 2013). Researchers have operationalized student engagement with three interrelated dimensions: (a) emotional, (b) cognitive, and (c) behavioral (Chase et al., 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004; Lam et al., 2014; Lee, 2014; Li &

Lerner, 2013). The different factors that show student engagement include the well-being of students, school environment, quality of learning, individual motivation, parental involvement, and instructional practices and behaviors of teachers (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; Lester, 2013; Mazer, 2013; Shernoff et al., 2006; Wang & Eccles, 2013).

I used Deci and Ryan's (2000) SDT to provide the guiding framework for the study. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the perceptions of prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional student engagement. The gap in the literature was the lack of understanding of how teachers perceived the influence of student engagement on the academic performance of ninth-grade students.

The next chapter will focus on the research methods. The chapter on the methodology will involve a detailed discussion of how the study will be conducted. The topics include the research setting, research design and rationale, role of the researcher, participant selection, instrumentation, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, maintenance of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers regarding the prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional student engagement. I collected data from semi-structured interviews with ninth-grade teachers, observation of these teachers' classrooms, and review of archival documents. Documents included information on enrollment rates, local and national rankings, advanced placement tests, mathematics proficiency, English proficiency, and student and teacher ratios. Findings may improve understanding of the underlying reasons for poor academic performance and school failure of ninth-grade students.

In this chapter, I provide details about the methodology. The chapter includes the following sections: (a) setting, (b) research design and rationale, (c) role of the researcher, (d) methodology (participant selection, instrumentation, recruitment, participation, data collection, and data analysis), (e) trustworthiness, and (f) ethical procedures. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key components of the research method.

Setting

The research setting of the study was a single grade in a single school district in the northeastern part of the United States. I focused on ninth-grade, a critical phase in a student's educational experience according to researchers (Longobardi et al., 2016; Roybal et al., 2014). The rationale for focusing on the ninth-grade was that researchers posited the transition from middle school to high school was a challenging experience for

many students (Longobardi et al., 2016; Roybal et al., 2014). Longobardi et al. (2016) characterized the transition from middle school to high school based on behavioral, social, and emotional changes.

Research Design and Rationale

I followed a qualitative exploratory single-case design and used semi-structured individual interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and archival documents as sources of data. Qualitative researchers use subjectivity, an exploratory approach to inquiry, and an in-depth focus on data collection and analysis (Silverman, 2016). Compared to quantitative research, where the focus is hypothesis testing and generalization of results, qualitative study is concerned with participant perceptions of potential underlying reasons or processes involved in a unique phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The unique phenomenon in this study was ninth-grade students' poor academic performances, focusing on student engagement.

A qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring first-person perspectives of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), as well as the range and variation in perspectives associated with a research topic (Maxwell, 2012). This approach was consistent with the purpose of the study, which was to explore the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers regarding the prospective causes of poor academic performances of ninth-grade students, focusing on cognitive, behavioral, and emotional student engagement. The qualitative approach was compatible with the goal of generating in-depth narratives and descriptions to understand and explain the research phenomenon of academic performance and student engagement (see Silverman, 2016).

The case study methodology is useful in examining complex processes that occur within bounded systems (Yin, 2013); this approach was useful in exploring teachers' perspectives on the complex processes (i.e., engagement) that have bearing on the academic performance of low-achieving students in the ninth grade. Case study methodology is strengthened by its inclusion of multiple methods of data collection to support triangulation of study findings (Yin, 2013). I used semistructured individual interviews with teachers, classroom observation, and archival document analysis of enrollment rates, local and national rankings, advanced placement tests, mathematics proficiency, English proficiency, and student and teacher ratios as data collection methods. A case study design was appropriate because using several data collection techniques was instrumental in providing an in-depth explanation of the possible causes of poor academic performance among ninth-grade students, based on the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers (see Yin, 2013).

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative studies, the researcher plays an important role in ensuring the quality of the findings (Collins & Cooper, 2014: Fusch & Ness, 2015; Yilmaz, 2013). Clearly defining the role of the researcher is important in a qualitative study (Yilmaz, 2013). For this study, I was responsible for the recruitment of eligible participants. I worked as a fifth-grade teacher in an elementary school in the study site district; I interviewed and observed 10 ninth-grade high school teachers from 2 out of 6 high schools in the district. The sample included two English teachers, two math teachers, two science teachers, two social studies teachers, and two world languages teachers. The

selection of teachers who taught different courses was intended to provide a diverse set of data reflecting teachers' perceptions of the reasons for the poor academic performance of students in the selected two schools.

I collected data by conducting individual semistructured interviews and classroom observations. Additionally, I collected archival records of enrollment rates, local and national rankings, advanced placement tests, mathematics proficiency, English proficiency, and student and teacher ratios. I was responsible for performing the data analysis to determine the themes that would answer the research questions. I generated the results by developing a narrative to incorporate all themes derived from the data analysis to answer the research questions.

Methodology

In this section, I discuss the methodology in detail. The first topic is the procedure for the selection of participants. The second topic is a discussion of the instruments used in the study. The third topic is a detailed discussion of the procedure for recruitment, participation, and data collection. The final topic is the data analysis procedure.

Participant Selection

The sample for this study consisted of 10 ninth-grade teachers in two high schools. Ten participants in a qualitative study is adequate based on the concept of data saturation, a critical point wherein data become repetitive (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation was determined by analyzing the data after each interview until repetition of themes was detected. Francis et al. (2010) found that 10 participants was usually

sufficient for most qualitative studies to reach data saturation. I was prepared to add more participants if unique findings were generated after 10 interviews.

To be eligible for the study, participants were required to satisfy the following criteria: (a) teachers who were teaching the ninth-grade level for at least one full school year, (b) full-time educators, and (c) teachers willing to participate in a 1-hour interview and a single 20- to 30-minute classroom observation. The exclusion criteria were the following: (a) part-time teachers, (b) middle school teachers, (c) preservice teachers, and (c) online instructors.

Instrumentation

The purpose of this study was addressed through collecting data from three different sources. These sources included semistructured interviews with 10 ninth-grade teachers, observation of these teachers' classrooms, and review of archival documents. The instruments used to collect these data are discussed in this section.

Semistructured interviews were the main data source for the study. The instrument that was used to collect the data was an interview guide (see Appendix A). The interview guide contained several open-ended questions to elicit the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers regarding the possible causes of poor academic achievement among ninth-grade students. The interview questions were developed by aligning the items to the research questions and the purpose of the study. The literature review and the theoretical framework also influenced the questions included in the interview guide.

For the classroom observation, an observation sheet (see Appendix B) was used to help me during the data collection. I used the observation sheet to consider the

instructional practices and behaviors of teachers that might play a role in the academic performance of students. The specific teacher behaviors or practices examined in the classroom derived from the literature review regarding the relationship between teacher practices and students' academic performance. The instrument was self-created based on the literature review, which meant that no copyright holder permission was necessary.

The observation involved two English teachers, two math teachers, two science teachers, two social studies teachers, and two world languages teachers. During the observation, I sat at the back of the class to minimize disrupting the natural environment of the class. The classroom observation sessions were not videotaped to minimize potential breaches in privacy and confidentiality.

Data for the review of archival documents included enrollment rates, local and national rankings, advanced placement tests, mathematics proficiency, English proficiency, and student and teacher ratios. These archival documents were collected from the state Department of Education. These archival records provided important context and opportunities for triangulation with the other two data sources. Specifically, the archival records provided support regarding the poor academic performance of ninth-grade students in the selected schools.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The recruitment of participants was accomplished by visiting the selected local school district to gain approval to conduct the study in the target research setting. The approval form is a letter indicating that the local school district allowed me to conduct the study in the setting (see Appendix C). After approval was secured from the school

district, I invited eligible participants by visiting a few schools in the district. I explained the study to potential participants in an empty classroom after class. The topics included in the explanation were voluntary participation, confidentiality and privacy, process for withdrawal, and disposal of data. I provided my e-mail address so interested individuals could contact me regarding their participation in the study. If no one showed an interest in the study, I intended to expand recruitment to other schools in the district.

Teachers participated in individual semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews and observations were scheduled based on participant availability. The interviews and observations were conducted on the same day if the schedule was convenient for the participants. A separate schedule for the interview and classroom observation was arranged if participants wished. I discussed keeping information confidential with each participant. I informed them their real names would not be included in the collection of data. I sent a summary of the observation notes through e-mail to each ninth-grade teacher after data collection. I instructed participants to review the observation notes and make clarifications if necessary.

Data were collected through semistructured interviews, classroom observations, and archival documents. For semistructured interviews, the individual session was approximately one hour long. The interviews were audio recorded using a smartphone so that the verbatim responses of the participants would be captured. The interviews occurred in the participant's classroom or office if formal consent was obtained. The interviews were also conducted outside the school premises if the teachers preferred.

For the classroom observation, data were collected by sitting for 20- to 30-minutes in a class taught by each participant. I examined each teacher's behaviors using information from the literature review about the role of teachers in their students' academic performance. The behaviors of the participants during the classroom observation might not capture their usual behaviors because of the tendency to act in socially desirable ways during naturalistic observation (Mick, 1996). This naturalistic observation was cited as a limitation in the study because teachers' usual behaviors in class could not be determined.

I also collected archival records for data triangulation. Archival records included enrollment rates, local and national rankings, advanced placement tests, mathematics proficiency, English proficiency, and student and teacher ratios. These archival documents were collected from the state Department of Education. The real names of the students, teachers, and institutions were not included in the collection of archival records. The archival records provided support regarding the poor academic performance of ninth-grade students in the selected schools.

Data Analysis Plan

All data were transferred to NVivo so that every document could be organized for analysis. NVivo is software used in qualitative studies, wherein large quantities of data can be stored so that researchers can conduct the analysis systematically (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). I maintained judgment as central to the analysis of data, specifically regarding the coding and determination of themes.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a common analytical strategy used in qualitative studies, wherein data are broken down into smaller units to determine relevant themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The specific steps followed are presented in this section.

The first step in thematic analysis is the familiarization of all the data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I gained knowledge by reading the interview transcripts, observation notes, and archival documents. At this stage, all data were coded, resulting in a list of preliminary codes for all the three data sources.

The second phase of thematic analysis is the examination of the codes for similarities (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). I combined codes that generally referred to the same idea or experience. These interrelated codes were arranged thematically, focusing on generating data needed to answer the research questions of the study.

The third phase of thematic analysis entails the listing of the preliminary themes based on the detailed analysis of the codes (Boyatzis, 1998). Generating a list of preliminary themes was important to achieve a pattern from data. A corresponding definition of the meaning of each of the themes was also provided to achieve clarity of data.

The fourth phase of thematic analysis is the systematic recognition of the pattern from the data, ensuring all themes indicate a coherent narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this stage of the analysis, I revisited the data to ensure the themes were well-

supported. Certain modifications were made before finalizing themes by combining or collapsing themes.

The fifth phase of thematic analysis involves creating a comprehensive description of the meaning or contribution of all the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I wrote several sentences to capture the essence of the most important feature of a theme. These descriptions of the themes were instrumental in understanding the differences from one another and direct relevance to the research questions.

The last phase of thematic analysis involves generating a thick description of the causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to the role of student engagement (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This narrative derived from themes generated from semistructured interviews, classroom observations, and archival records. All themes were integrated into a single coherent narrative to address the research questions directly. The interviews were instrumental in uncovering the perceptions of prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, focusing on the role of student engagement. The classroom observations were used to consider the culture of the two high schools. The archival records provided support regarding the poor academic performance of ninth-grade students and the overall characteristics of the research setting.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative studies, trustworthiness is an important consideration because of the absence of the more typical quantitative measures of quality, such as validity and reliability (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and

transferability are four strategies that researchers have often used to enhance the trustworthiness of a qualitative study (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Shenton, 2004; Silverman, 2016). Each of these strategies is discussed in this section.

Credibility involves participants confirming the findings as accurate and reflective of their true experiences or perceptions (Houghton et al., 2013). I enhanced credibility by using member checking of the interview data. I sent the interview transcripts and the summary of the observation notes through email to the 10 ninth-grade teachers. I instructed participants to review the transcripts to correlate any necessary corrections from errors. I incorporated their corrections in the final transcripts used for data analysis.

Dependability refers to the consistency or repeatability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I enhanced dependability by being mindful of changes during the study, such as the final sample size or the research setting. I made some modifications from the proposal because of the limitations of the design after all data were collected and analyzed.

Confirmability refers to the neutrality of the results, underscoring the use of objective measures in the determination of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I enhanced confirmability by using an audit trail to document certain decisions or choices during the course of the study. The audit trail included details about every aspect of the study, such as the recruitment of participants, data collection, data organization, and data analysis. I used an audit trail to support the results by showing rationale between the collected data and the final results.

Transferability or generalizability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied in other contexts outside the setting used in a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I enhanced transferability by having a thick description of the intended context of the study, including the participants directly involved in the phenomenon The intent of this thick description was to equip other researchers with the needed information to decide whether the findings were applicable in a particular setting.

Ethical Procedures

To enhance the ethical quality of the study, a few key procedures were conducted. These key procedures included gaining of the participants' informed consent, guarantee of confidentiality, voluntary participation that is free from coercion, and proper disposal of data after the study was completed. Each of these procedures is discussed in this section.

I used informed consent forms for participants to acquire key information that was instrumental in their decisions to be included in the study. The informed consent form was a short document that outlined all the key aspects central to conducting ethical research. The document included the purpose of the study, the confidential nature of the research, and the process for exiting the study, the anticipated risks, and the procedure for disposal of data. Securing the signature of the participants was necessary to commence the study formally. I avoided bias by not including participants personally known to me.

I prioritized confidentiality of information to protect participants from being known to the public. I used unique identifiers to conceal the real names of participants. When presenting the results, I used unique identifiers when referring to a particular quote

or experience. All physical data were kept in a locked cabinet. All electronic data were stored on a password-protected computer.

Withdrawal from the study was honored because voluntary participation was important to ensure that the research was conducted ethically. I made the procedure simple and brief to prevent further inconvenience. Sending a brief email to me about their intent to withdraw from the study was adequate to terminate their involvement as participants.

The disposal of data will be accomplished by destroying all data that can be traced back to the participants seven years after the approval of the dissertation. These data included informed consent forms, observation notes and transcripts, and coding sheets and summaries. Seven years after the approval of the dissertation, all data will be destroyed either through paper shredding or complete eradication of files in the computer's hard drive.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the perceptions of prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional student engagement. Using qualitative research approach is compatible with generating in-depth narratives and descriptions to understand the research phenomenon of academic performance and student engagement (Silverman, 2016). A case study research was appropriate because using several data collection techniques was instrumental in having an in-depth explanation for the possible causes of poor academic performance among ninth-grade students (see Yin, 2013).

The sample for this study consisted of 10 ninth-grade teachers. Ten participants were an adequate sample size for the study because of the assumptions made about data saturation, as based on research (Fusch & Ness, 2015). More participants were added if data saturation was not yet apparent with the initial target sample size. I collected data using multiple methods: (a) semistructured interviews, (b) classroom observations, and (c) archival documents. All data from the three sources were transferred to NVivo; therefore, every document was organized for the analysis. I analyzed data using thematic analysis to break down qualitative data into smaller units to determine relevant codes and themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The next chapter includes the presentation of the findings based on the results of the data analysis. The themes from each of the data source are presented separately. These themes are integrated into a coherent narrative that answers the research questions of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

A gap in the literature existed regarding teachers' perceptions of the causes of poor academic proficiency among high school students, specifically in relation to the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions of student engagement. To address this gap in research, I conducted a qualitative single case study to explore the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers regarding the prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional student engagement. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are ninth-grade teachers' perspectives on the causes of poor academic performance among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students?

RQ2: What are ninth-grade teachers' perspectives on the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students?

The aim of this chapter is to answer the research questions. This chapter consists of seven sections, including this introduction in the first section. The second section contains the setting of the study, including descriptions of the sample of 10 ninth-grade teachers. The third section provides information on the data collection process, and the fourth section contains the data analysis procedures. The data sources were semistructured interviews, classroom observations, and document review. I analyzed data using thematic analysis (see Clarke & Braun, 2014). The results of the study are presented in the fifth section. The results are presented according to themes derived from data analysis. The sixth section provides evidence of trustworthiness. Finally, the seventh section contains a summary to conclude the chapter.

Setting

The setting of the study was two high schools from the same school district in the northeastern part of the United States. The focus of the study was ninth-grade teachers from the selected schools. Ninth grade is considered a critical phase in a student's educational advancement due to the experience of transitioning from middle school to high school (Longobardi et al., 2016; Roybal et al., 2014). Furthermore, the experience of transition is thought to influence students' behavioral, social, and emotional characteristics (Longobardi et al., 2016).

Data Collection

The data sources for this study were semistructured interviews, classroom observations, and review of archival documents. Ten ninth-grade teachers employed in two high schools from the same school district in the northeastern part of the United States were interviewed and observed for this study. The inclusion criteria for selecting the participants included teachers who (a) taught the ninth-grade level for at least one full school year, (b) were full-time educators, and (c) were willing to participate in a 1-hour interview and a single 20- to 30-minute classroom observation. The exclusion criteria included (a) part-time teachers, (b) middle school teachers, (c) preservice teachers, and (c) online instructors. I first obtained permission from the school district to conduct the study. Once permission was obtained, I visited the selected schools to invite participants. I met potential participants after class in an empty classroom within the school to discuss the nature and purpose of the study. I provided the teachers with my e-mail address so they could contact me for an interview and classroom observation. Prior to the data

collection phase, I collected informed consent forms from the participants as evidence that they understood the nature of their voluntary participation, confidentiality, privacy, the process for withdrawal, and disposal of data. Alphanumeric codes were assigned to each participant in place of their names to conceal their identities.

Interview schedules and classroom observations were scheduled individually and based on the availability of the teachers. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted about 20- to 30-minutes each. The audio recordings were transcribed in Microsoft Word yielding 33 pages of transcript. The observations from the classrooms were recorded in an observation sheet. Ten pages of observation sheets were collected.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by the six-phase thematic analysis of Clarke and Braun (2014). The six phases of thematic analysis included familiarization with data, initial code generation, themes identification, themes review, the naming of themes, and final report production. The goal of data analysis was to answer the research questions. Themes were developed from the data analysis procedures to answer the research questions.

To begin data analysis, I first became familiar with the data. I personally conducted the interviews and the observations and made notes during the data collection process. I also transcribed the data into Microsoft Word files. I then repeatedly read the transcripts and noted common patterns or themes. Then, I began the second phase of data analysis: initial code generation. Using NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software, I uploaded the Microsoft Word files to an “interview” folder and “observation” folder. The

transcripts were opened one at a time and read line by line. Chunks of data considered relevant to the research questions were highlighted. The highlighted data were then assigned to specific nodes, a feature in the NVivo software that serves to depict a unit of meaning and to label those data. For example, the statement "For this question, it's definitely the guidance from their parents … the parent's guidance. You know, some parents … they're not home and don't control the kids like they're supposed to" from the transcript of Teacher 7 was highlighted and assigned under the node *parental involvement*. The statement was coded without any other context apart from being interpreted as relevant to answering the research questions.

Once all interview and observation transcripts were coded, the third phase of data analysis began. The third phase involved theme identification. The codes identified from the previous phase were reviewed for connections and relationships by finding common patterns among the data. Common patterns among the data referred to texts pertaining to the same information. For instance, the sample initial code *parental involvement* was compared with the codes *school system and curriculum*, *support from teachers*, and *coping with learning disabilities*. I found out that the listed initial codes pertained to data on the lack of support from parents, teachers, and the school system that low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students received. Therefore, the theme *lack of support* was identified. Figure 1 shows how the initial codes were assigned to nodes, and how the nodes were clustered under a theme.

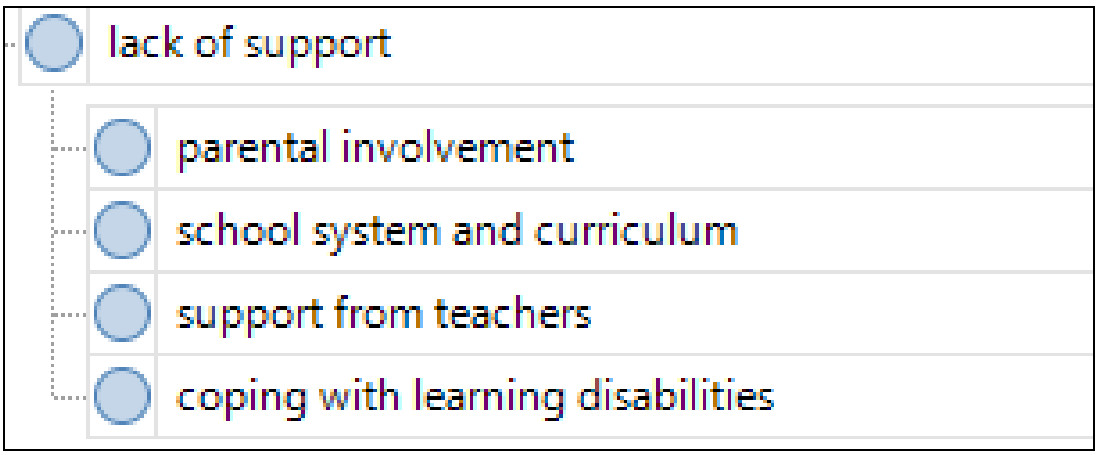

Figure 1. Theme identification. The figure shows a visual representation of how themes were identified using the initial codes through the feature of NVivo 11.

The generated themes were then subjected to review to conduct the fourth phase of data analysis. At this phase, I decided whether to combine, refine, separate, or discard the identified themes based on how the themes related to each other. I answered the following question: Do the themes make sense among each other while being distinct from each other? I checked whether the themes answered the research questions and whether the themes' contribution in answering the research questions were not overlapping. For instance, in answering RQ1, I focused on reviewing themes related to the causes of the poor academic performance of low-achieving and non-achieving ninth-grade students. The themes were compared with the interview and observation data to check whether these were explicitly stated by the participants or directly implied. I also triangulated the data from the interviews and the observations at this point. Data from the two data sources were compared and contrasted with each other based on the similarities and differences of their contribution to developing the themes to strengthen the findings.

The themes were reviewed in the context of the raw data and the overall data set. Then, the naming of themes was conducted.

In the fifth phase of data analysis, I defined and named the themes. I verified that each theme was captured in essence. To provide an overview, eight themes were developed from data analysis: (a) no or little student engagement, (b) lack of support, (c) lack of basic skills, (d) lack of interest in school, (e) different levels and styles of learning, (f) mind-set in relation to performance, (g) disciplinary issues, and (h) belongingness in the classroom. Table 2 illustrates the descriptions of each theme to show how each theme was distinct from the other themes and how each theme was relevant in answering the research questions.

Table 2

Names and Definition of Themes

Theme	Definition
No or little student engagement	The students' lack of involvement in school activities including but not limited to the completion of assignments, recitation, interaction, and asking questions
Lack of support	The inadequacy of assistance, encouragement, and approval received by the students
Lack of basic skills	Deficiency in the lessons learned in previous grade levels
Lack of interest in school	Showing indifference toward school
Different levels and styles of learning	Acknowledgment that not all students learned the same way, and awareness of using different pedagogical approaches to engage students
The mind-set in relation to performance	Students' mental attitude toward school success
Disciplinary issues	Students' behavior in the classroom
Belongingness in the classroom	Students' sense of acceptance in the classroom

Lastly, the sixth phase of data analysis involved final report production. The final report contained narratives and excerpts from the data to support the themes in answering the research questions. The themes, along with the supporting evidence of the findings, are presented in the next section.

Results

The presentation of the results is provided in this section. The section is organized into subsections containing the descriptions, narratives, and excerpts from the data of the following themes: (a) no or little student engagement, (b) lack of support, (c) lack of basic skills, (d) lack of interest in school, (e) different levels and styles of learning, (f) mind-set in relation to performance, (g) disciplinary issues, and (h) belongingness in the classroom. The themes were identified to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are ninth-grade teachers' perspectives on the causes of poor academic performance among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students?

RQ2: What are ninth-grade teachers' perspectives on the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students?

Themes 1, 2, 3, and 4 answered RQ1, and themes 5, 6, 7, and 8 answered RQ2. An overview of the themes listed with the number of references is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Overview of the Themes

Theme	Number of references
None or little student engagement	32
Lack of support	15
Lack of basic skills	11
Lack of interest in school	8
Different levels and styles of learning	9
The mind-set in relation to performance	6
Disciplinary issues	11
Belongingness in the classroom	15

No or Little Student Engagement

One of the ninth-grade teachers' perspectives on the causes of poor academic performance was that low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students had no or little engagement. According to the teachers, engagement included participation in class. However, some teachers perceived that participation was not limited to speaking aloud in front of the class. Engagement in online classrooms and discussion boards was also considered active participation. Online participation was believed to allow students who were shy or not strong in oral participation a chance to participate in lessons actively. Nonetheless, low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students tended to be passive in any form of participation. Teacher 3 reported the following:

> So, student engagement overall, I think is probably the most important factor when it comes to low-achieving students. Because if they're not engaged, they're not going to do well. Whatever they're doing, if they're not engaged, they're not going to retain information.

The interaction was key to engaging the students. Teacher 8 and Teacher 5 reported that language might best be learned through practice; therefore, they try to speak with the students and get them to participate. Teacher 5 stated the following:

> Participation is what gives them the opportunity to practice the language and to practice what they learned and to make mistakes and to be corrected. So, I think it's very important that the students participate, especially in a language class, because that's how you learn. That's how you retain the vocabulary if you don't practice it. Even if you think you know it, but you actually forget it.

I conducted observations to see how teachers interacted with their students. The teachers generally allowed the students to ask questions, provide their opinions, and do classroom activities, while the teachers walked around the classroom to see how the students were doing. Teacher 7 reported that when students were engaged, the teacher fulfilled his or her job well, and teachers generally did not need to remind the students of their tasks. The participant felt that low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students had trouble fulfilling tasks that the teacher asked, and they generally had incomplete assignments. Furthermore, the participant also perceived that students who were not engaged tended to have poor academic performance due to being unable to receive feedback. Teacher 7 stated the following:

> In my opinion, I think that when the student is not engaged … when the student is not engaged, they can't perform effectively because engagement is the key. If a student's not engaged and, as I told you already, they make the teacher frustrated. And they're frustrated because when it's time to give feedback, they can't

> because that was the cause of low engagement, or not learning at all. I think that's the way I can see it.

In addition, low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students tended to lack engagement due to the fear of asking for help. Teacher 6 reported the following:

> I think sometimes a lot of students are afraid to actually ask for help. I've had students come up to me during class time, or after class, and ask me things afterward, that say that they were afraid to approach me about something. So, they think that I or other students around them who might overhear them think that they're dumb.

Generally, most teachers reported that students who were higher engaged performed better academically compared to students who were not engaged. However, Teacher 9 discussed outlier cases:

> There are sometimes when highly engaged students do continue to struggle and that's possibly due to some other common challenges that I mentioned prior to the interview. And there are also academically gifted students that may show a lack of engagement, but they also tend to perform well academically. So those would be considered my outliers in this case.

Lack of Support

The ninth-grade teachers also reported that lack of support for the students caused poor academic performance. Generally, the participants believed that support for better academic performance should mainly come from teachers and parents. Support from teachers generally involved addressing each students' learning needs. This finding was

related to another theme, *different levels, and styles of learning*. The teachers generally reported that some students needed to be focused on more than others. Teacher 4 stated the following:

> And as a teacher with 20 other kids in the class you really try to do as much of that as you can, but again, it's limited. You don't have the time to do it. So, again, it's multifaceted, engagement and social distraction, technology distractions, inability to move forward with an assignment because they just don't have the skill set, it is difficult for them. So, when something is challenging and difficult, often times they will just turn off and not do the assignment because it's too difficult.

As seen in the observations, the teachers provided students with different activities. Some activities required the students to work alone or in a small group, while some activities required the students to speak in front of the class. The teachers clarified the instructions and the objective of the assignments. Nonetheless, support from teachers included the detecting and addressing students' learning disabilities. Teacher 9 perceived that some students struggled academically due to "learning disabilities going unnoticed for extended periods of time." Teacher 4 reported the following:

> The other issues may be that, again, there may not be a connection with the teacher, they may have learning issues that are not being addressed adequately enough in the classroom. Maybe they need, some of my students really need one on one engagement, or one on one just where a teacher sits down with them to go through an assignment one on one.

Some teachers perceived that despite wanting to address students' individual learning needs, the school system and the curriculum did not allow such support. Teacher 2 stated the following:

> In my particular classes, I think one of the reasons ... Again, I'll go back to the lack of skills, and also I think another thing that they seem to have problems is a lack of adequate support. Because sometimes the school doesn't have the type of support that these kids need to be successful.

Nonetheless, parental involvement was also perceived as helpful in supporting the learning needs of low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students. Teacher 9 shared that from 15 years of experience, the lack of parental involvement or support presented challenges in learning, leading to underachievement in students. Teacher 10 reported the following:

> Students' family home lives is a cause of less-than-proficient performances. Many students are not pushed to excel at home, and many face difficult situations after a school day. This, in turn, leads to a minimal effort during school hours. Many students are just not putting in the work to excel.

Lack of Basic Skills

Most participants perceived that the lack of basic academic skills caused poor academic performance among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students. Most participants perceived that some ninth-grade students were not prepared to transition from middle school to high school due to the lack of skills in reading, math, and other academic skills. Teacher 1 reported the following:

> In my notations, the students come to high school without the basic knowledge from middle school in the field of science. In some cases, the students have a non-certified teacher in middle school. Actually, it's not like non-certified, but there are teachers like whose certification is mostly for math and English, but they are required also to teach science. That's what I meant.

Some teachers stated that low-performing students had poor academic performance due to difficulty with ninth-grade lessons because of the lack of proficiency in middle school lessons. Teacher 2 stated, "Because students in the ninth grade that can barely count, that really need their multiplication facts, and then we try to teach them algebra which makes it very complicated for them." The participant further stated the following:

> For instance, it's going to focus on the low engagement for ninth-grade students that we see them coming in their first year of high school. Maybe one thing we need to ensure is that they are at least close to the basic skill level to be engaged in high school type of courses.

Apart from the basic academic skills, Teacher 3 perceived that low-performing students tended to lack skills in coping with the workload required in high school. Teacher 8 reported similarly:

> In my opinion, one of the most common challenges ninth-grade students face is sometimes the overwhelming feeling of high school. Students that underachieve usually feel overwhelmed by the amount of work and the number of classes that come with being a high school student.

Lack of Interest in School

Regarding the previous theme, most teachers perceived that low-performing students tended to show a lack of interest in school, especially if they lacked the basic skills to understand the lessons. Teacher 10 reported, "I notice that students who are struggling are not usually exposed in the subject matter. Many times, students show little care as would … Rather than be interactive with the lesson." Teacher 9 stated that the lack of interest in school depended on students' beliefs in the value of schooling. The belief might be related to parental involvement and support, such that when parents did not value education, children tended to place less value on education as well. The participant reported the following:

> If a student doesn't value his or her education, it's typically a reflection of their family values and things they learn at home. The low levels of achievement, in this case, are usually a direct result of the student simply not caring or understanding why he or she needs to learn what is being taught by the teacher.

Some students showed little interest in school due to distractions and focusing on their social lives. Based on the observations, some groups of students came in late to class. Some students had their heads bowed during lessons, while some students used their phones. Teacher 3 reported the following:

> The ones that are not as far achieving as high are the ones that are getting lost off in, whether it be a cell phone, or something out the window, whatever, or their friend talking, whatever it might be, so just keeping them engaged the entire time and interested in what we're doing.

Teacher 6 reported that some students tended to overthink the process of doing the assignment, rather than simply doing the assignment, and these students tended to be more interested in occurrences around them. The participant stated the following:

> And then another challenge I find is that they don't really manage their time very well, so, you know, spend 20 minutes just writing their name on the paper or whatever, as an exaggeration. Or they might sit and talk with another person sitting next to them, and then they look at the time, and they realize, oh, I only have about five minutes left to finish this assignment that's supposed to take 20 minutes to finish. So that's another problem that I noticed.

Different Levels and Styles of Learning

The teachers believed that cognitive engagement played a significant role in academic performance. They enhanced cognitive engagement through engaging different levels and styles of learning. Current curriculum allowed for small group instruction, which might be helpful in engaging different types of learners. Teacher 7 reported the following:

> Another thing, in the low engagement, sometimes some students ... you know, when you got a different level of learning. You got visual learning, you got another kind of learning, but those students you can't help them out by giving them the project. We leave it to the concept, so they can earn ... They can earn some grades. So, they don't fail.

During the classroom observations, I noted that most teachers provided activities for students. In one observation, the teacher separated the students in smaller groups, with

each group doing a different activity. Some students worked on a PowerPoint presentation, some students worked on making posters, and some students worked on grammar rules, while other students worked on math problems. Overall, all students worked on a task. According to Teacher 4, using various instructions helped engage different types of students. The participant shared the following:

> If you engage students that are lower achieving, you get them to participate on another level. So, if you're, for example, they're having trouble writing maybe they can read a passage and then talk about it verbally instead of writing enough you have them coming up with the theme of a story. If they can verbalize the theme at least that way you know that they're getting the concept of theme and if they're not able to write it at least they can verbalize it and then you can work on writing it later but again that comes from engaging the student in multiple ways. And each student is different, so you have to try to figure out how to best engage each student, it does help tremendously.

The teachers perceived that no matter what medium of instruction teachers used, the goal was to let students understand the concepts in the lesson; therefore, students became interested and engaged in performing better academically. During the observation of a language class, the teacher engaged students through teaching the meaning and usage of words. Teacher 7 stated the following:

> The cognitive, I guess when … Cognitive engagement is the key, because when students are engaged. So that makes you feel good because you know that they understand what's going on in class. And when you give tests and quizzes, they'll

> be able to Ace it and then that makes you feel good and ends well. That tells you that they loved the concept and tell you that you can move forward to another level.

Teachers 1 and 4 perceived that most students might be engaged by connecting the concepts taught in class to the students' daily lives. Teacher 1 shared the following:

> Mm-hmm (affirmative)-Um, I do think we should challenge them. Some students may walk away. Some students may find it interesting. One of the most stimulating things I … Is to connect the lesson to their daily lives, because that way they need all these skills necessary for the 21st century.

Mind-Set in Relation to Performance

Teachers perceived increasing cognitive engagement occurred through changing the mind-set of low-performing students. According to most teachers, low-performing students tended to have a mind-set of failure regarding academic performance. Teacher 6 shared that some students perceived they would not perform well in class; therefore, they might not even try to perform at all. Similarly, Teacher 4 stated that when some students had no idea how to begin an assignment for a certain subject, they perceived the subject as challenging; therefore, they might have negative perspectives about the subject.

For Teacher 2, some students only did the minimum of what was expected. Those students' mind-sets typically involved merely passing and moving from one grade level to another. The participant reported the following:

> Most of them have been since the 3rd grade, for whatever reason, they've just been passing classes becoming isolated in knowing what they have to do and it

> has become like a habit for them. They think, "Oh we have to show up from September to June and next you move to the next grade." So that has them form a belief that it's only attendance that matters. It doesn't matter whatever you engage in the lesson, whether you do your work or not, next year you are going to go to the next grade level anyway.

Disciplinary Issues

Regarding behavioral engagement, some teachers acknowledged factors, such as rewards, students' efforts, and shyness; however, most teachers mentioned discipline and disciplinary issues. The teachers believed that low-performing students faced disciplinary issues, especially acting out in class. Teacher 3 believed that behavioral engagement might be increased by providing students with the appropriate amount and difficulty of activities. When students could not accomplish the activities or had no activities, they tended to act out. The participant reported the following:

> Giving them [the students] something that will not allow them to have any free time to kind of act out or have bad behavior, I think is huge. Because, most of the time, the students that we have, the ones that are acting out, are acting out because they have some sort of downtime, or they have some time to kind of fool around, whatever it might be, so I think keeping them engaged at all times, curbs some of those behavioral issues.

According to Teacher 5, when students presented disciplinary issues in class, they not only disrupted their own learning but also disturbed the entire class. The participant stated, "I think also, if we have a behavioral problem in the classroom, then the teacher

will spend too much time in discipline and classroom management." Conversely, Teacher 6 perceived that disciplinary issues existed in a spectrum of students acting out to students who were passive in class. Issues in behavioral engagement also included students who were "so quiet and so reserved" in class. Teacher 4 reported similarly:

> Again, behavioral engagement is something that a lot of the students at the lower level tend to have. Many of them tend to act out in class in certain ways. Some of them can be very disruptive, some of them can be at a point where they just don't participate and sort of go to sleep. Might be just going on their phone or just spending long periods of time walking around in the hallway. The key thing is to try to reign in that behavior and force them to engage with the lesson, not put up with disruptive behavior and try to have some sense of consistency in the class.

Belongingness in the Classroom

Finally, the teachers believed that emotionally engaging students helped boost academic performance, and one way to increase emotional engagement was to make the students feel belongingness in the classroom. Some teachers believed that low-performing students tended to feel detached from the classroom, which might originate from the lack of respect given to them. Teacher 8 shared that teachers should show respect to all types of students to help students feel welcome in class. The participant stated the following:

> In my opinion, emotional engagement could play a crucial role among low-achieving students. All students should feel welcome in every class and feel as though they belong in the class and in the school. However, I would say that low-

achieving students sometimes display an eagerness to be accepted by their peers, which at times translates into trying to be the center of attention.

Teacher 1 reported there should be mutual respect between students and teachers, fellow students, and school staff to foster an emotionally engaging learning environment. In the observations, one teacher counseled students on the importance of respecting each other. I also observed that students generally worked well together and were respectful of each other. However, one class had two students who argued with each other and called each other names. The students did not work on the benchmark assignment.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To increase the trustworthiness of the findings, credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability were observed. Credibility referred to the genuineness of the study findings. I did not distort the participants' responses to fit a certain narrative when interpreting the data. Dependability referred to the extent to which the study could be replicated by other researchers yielding consistent findings. Transferability referred to the degree to which the study findings might be generalized in other contexts (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

I employed data triangulation to strengthen the study. With multiple data sources, I cross-examined the findings to increase the credibility of this study, as more than one evidence was provided to support the findings (see Creswell, 2013). I observed data saturation and member checking to increase credibility. I exhausted the data until no new findings emerged to reach data saturation. The transcripts and interpretations were sent to the participants for review and correction to accomplish member checking.

I also properly documented the processes involved in the study to increase transferability and dependability (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Proper documentation might help in future replications of the study. Proper documentation provided accurate references when cross-checking data, which increased confirmability of this study.

Summary

This chapter contained the presentation of the results that answered the research questions. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the perceptions of prospective causes of the poor academic performance of ninth-grade students, with particular attention to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional student engagement. The research questions that guided this study were the following:

RQ1: What are ninth-grade teachers' perspectives on the causes of poor academic performance among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students?

RQ2: What are ninth-grade teachers' perspectives on the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students?

Ten ninth-grade teachers from two high schools in the same school district in the northeastern region of the United States participated. The participants volunteered to be individually interviewed and observed in the classroom. Collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis and triangulated to generate the themes, which answered the research questions. Eight overarching themes emerged from the data, which included (a) no or little student engagement, (b) lack of support (c) lack of basic skills, (d) lack of interest in school, (e) different levels and styles of learning, (f) mind-set in relation to performance, (g) disciplinary issues, and (h) belongingness in the classroom. Themes 1 to

4 answered the first research question, while Themes 5 to 8 answered the second research question.

Overall, ninth-grade teachers reported that students who lacked engagement in the classroom tended to have poor academic performance. Furthermore, the participants believed that teachers and parents shared equal responsibilities in supporting the learning needs of the students, especially for students with learning disabilities or for students with nontraditional learning styles whose learning was not supported by the current school system and curriculum. In addition, students who performed poorly in academics tended to lack the basic skills required in entering the ninth-grade. Some students might not be prepared to transition from middle school to high school, while some students might not have mastered the lessons from middle school. Lastly, the participants linked poor academic performance with a lack of interest in school. Students who were not interested in school placed little value in learning and were often distracted in class.

The teachers generally believed that cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement played a role in the students' academic performance. Cognitive engagement involved identifying and engaging the students' learning styles. However, despite the students' learning styles, the teachers generally perceived that students learned when they understood the concept. One way of making the students understand abstract concepts was through connecting the lessons to the students' daily lives.

In addition, cognitive engagement involved setting the mind-set to perform well academically. Most teachers believed that low-performing students tended to have their minds set to failure, which might cause the students to underperform. The mind-set might

also influence the students' behavior in class. Behavioral engagement generally involved dealing with disciplinary issues. Most disciplinary issues faced by the teachers regarding low-performing students was acting out; however, some teachers believed that passive actions might also be considered disciplinary issues, such as sleeping in class.

Finally, to improve academic performance, the teachers generally reported that emotionally engaging the students might help. Making the students feel belongingness in the classroom, despite their academic performance, might help overall student engagement and academic performance. The discussion of the relationship between the themes and how the findings related to the theoretical framework and existing literature presented in Chapter 2 are provided in Chapter 5. The next chapter also includes the implications, recommendations, and conclusions of this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The transition to high school is characterized by academic, social, and emotional challenges, especially for at-risk students such as those who come from economically disadvantaged families, those with learning difficulties, or those who have behavioral concerns (Crosnoe et al., 2015; Goux et al., 2016). At-risk students in the ninth grade are of concern because the lack of academic proficiency at this level is associated with subsequent grade retention and dropout risks (Fall & Roberts, 2012). The increased academic requirements coupled with socioemotional challenges can result in underperforming students dropping out shortly after transitioning from middle school to high school (Goux et al., 2016). Federal mandates in recent years, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and Every Student Succeeds Act, have increased accountability regarding student performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Researchers have identified student engagement as a critical factor in increasing motivation and achievement in students (Al-Alwan, 2014; Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Lester, 2013; Lee, 2014; Weiss & Garcia, 2015). Researchers have found that low engagement among eighth-, ninth-, and 10th-grade students is associated with increased likelihood of dropping out by the end of high school (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Henry et al., 2012). Student engagement manifests through three interrelated dimensions: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral (Lee, 2014; Li & Lerner, 2013). The emotional dimension pertains to the relationships and interactions the student has with teachers, classmates, and the school environment. The behavioral dimension pertains to the student's involvement with the school's academic and social activities, and

the cognitive dimension involves the psychological and cognitive thinking of students (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Student engagement is affected by interpersonal and environmental phenomena, including teachers' instructional style and development of classroom emotional climate (Reeve, 2012; Reyes et al., 2012). However, despite the studies showing the relationship between student engagement, performance, and achievement, more research was needed to understand the perspectives of teachers who teach students who are in the transitional period between middle school and high school. There was a paucity of research on teachers' perspectives regarding the factors that affect the engagement and performance of ninth-grade students, particularly low-performing students (Henry et al., 2012; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Additionally, there was a need to explore teacher perspectives on how and why ninth-grade students experience academic challenges (Barkaoui et al., 2015; Glennie et al., 2012). To address this gap in knowledge, I conducted a qualitative, single case study explore the perceptions of ninth-grade teachers regarding the prospective causes of poor academic performance of ninth-grade students.

To satisfy the purpose of the study, I formulated two research questions. The first research question addressed the teachers' perspectives on the causes of poor academic performance among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students. The second research question addressed the teachers' perspectives on the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students. To answer these research questions, I collected qualitative data by conducting semistructured interviews with 10 ninth-grade teachers from two high schools in the same school district

in the northeastern part of the United States. Data were also collected through classroom observations and review of archival documents. The qualitative data were analyzed using six-phase thematic analysis to determine the relevant themes.

This chapter contains the results of the data analysis and a discussion of these results in relation to existing literature. The chapter also contains sections on the limitations of the study and the implications of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations based on the results of the study.

Interpretation of Findings

Eight themes were identified from the data analysis: (a) no or little student engagement, (b) lack of support, (c) lack of basic skills, (d) lack of interest in school, (e) different levels and styles of learning, (f) mind-set in relation to performance, (g) disciplinary issues, and (h) belongingness in the classroom. Themes 1 to 4 answered the first research question, while Themes 5 to 8 answered the second research question.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study was based on Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory. Individuals experience heightened motivation once their psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The results from this study were consistent with this theory in two regards. First, regarding competence, participants identified the lack of skills as a hindrance to student engagement. Students who have not mastered basic cognitive skills in middle school usually have a hard time coping academically with the high school workload. In the current study, one teacher stated that during classroom activities, students who could

perform classroom tasks well were generally more engaged and could explore the subject matter on a higher level of understanding. In contrast, students who did not master the basic skills displayed a lack of interest in the learning activities, which resulted in poor academic performance. The idea of competence was also extended to skills such as time management or coping with the stresses of higher academic levels. Students who did not know how to manage their time properly could not complete assignments and performed poorly in class. Students with poor coping skills might feel helpless or unable to handle stress, which could make them more likely to detach or disengage, perform poorly, and eventually drop out of high school.

Self-determination theory also identified relatedness as an influence on motivation. Relatedness was consistent with the findings in the study as expressed by the theme of belongingness in the classroom. According to the participants, low-performing students often felt detached from the classroom, which pointed to the importance of helping each student develop a sense of belonging in the class. One key aspect identified in the study was the perception that low-performing students were not respected in class. In the classroom observation, one teacher responded to this problem by counseling the students on the importance of respecting one another. This was one practical recommendation that could be implemented to increase student motivation and engagement.

The importance of support is also addressed in self-determination theory. Deci and Ryan (2000) asserted that the natural tendencies of individuals for growth do not operate automatically and that ongoing social support is needed. The importance of the

social context is identified in the encouragement or discouragement of psychological growth and fulfillment of individuals. In the context of a ninth-grade student, social context includes the significant adult figures in his or her life, such as parents or guardians, teachers, and school staff members. Participants in the current study reported that a lack of support could affect engagement and school performance among ninth-grade students. The participants identified different manifestations of support. The first manifestation was the support in the form of parental involvement and family environment. Students who had difficult home lives or who were not pushed to excel in school were reported to display minimal effort during school hours.

The second manifestation was the support provided by teachers for different learning styles and abilities, particularly for students with learning disabilities or behavioral issues. This support was shown when teachers provided a variety of activities to match student learning styles and abilities, which was associated with another theme identified from the data analysis: different levels and styles of learning. The teachers indicated that using a variety of learning activities helped learners understand the concepts and made it easier to engage their interest. Moreover, using a variety of learning activities helped them perform better in learning activities, which made it easier for the teachers to engage them in a deeper exploration of the subject they were learning about.

The participants also highlighted the importance of teacher support in detecting and addressing students' learning disabilities. The participants reported that in some cases, poor performance was attributed to a learning disability that was undiagnosed and unaddressed. Participants also identified the importance of the support provided by the

school system. One participant stated that although teachers wanted to address students' learning difficulties, their school system or their curriculum did not allow for such support. Without these crucial support systems, at-risk students are more likely to drop out from high school (Goux e al., 2016; Ricard & Pelletier, 2016).

Research Question 1: Causes of Poor Academic Performance

A review of existing literature on the causes of poor academic performance among students indicated a paucity of studies on the specific population for this study. Previous studies were conducted for students at middle school or high school levels in general and did not address ninth-grade students specifically or were conducted in cultures and contexts outside of the United States. Despite these different contexts and populations, many of the findings from previous studies were echoed in the results of the current study. In this study, support or lack of support was identified as a major factor relating to poor academic performance. This finding is consistent with Peters and Woolley's (2015) study of middle school and high school students. Peters and Woolley asserted that higher levels of support predicted academic success, as measured by grades, with support accounting for variances between the control levels of students. Fall and Roberts (2012) found that the students' perceptions of parent and teacher support predicted students' engagement and academic achievement. Although Fall and Roberts used data from students and the current study included data from teachers, the results were consistent. Parental involvement was also found to have a direct influence on student engagement and an indirect influence on achievement through the mediating variable of school engagement (Al-Alwan, 2014). Findings from the current study are

consistent with Al-Alwan's (2014) conclusion that parental involvement is a key factor in supporting learning needs.

In the current study, teachers recognized the importance of their relationship with the students in developing student engagement. Apart from their roles in structuring the students' learning experiences, participants articulated the need to develop a good teacher-student relationship, particularly for at-risk students who might need one-on-one interaction with teachers to address their concerns. These findings were in line with assertions that the teacher-student relationship was particularly important during critical transition periods (Akiri, 2013; Longobardi et al., 2016), and that the teacher-student relationship served as a supportive factor that can encourage positive engagement from students (De Laet et al., 2016).

One significant finding from previous studies indicated that the quality of perceived teacher-student relationship significantly predicted the academic achievement of freshman high school students (Longobardi et al., 2016). This finding was of interest in the current study because the focus was on ninth-grade students. The importance of the student-teacher relationship was also highlighted in multiple studies showing that teacher-student relationships were significantly predictive of the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions of student engagement (De Laet et al., 2016; Mazer, 2013).

Research Question 2: Cognitive, Behavioral, and Emotional Engagement Among Low-Achieving or Nonproficient Ninth-Grade Students

The second research question was formulated to explore how engagement manifests among low-achieving or nonproficient ninth-grade students. The responses

from the participants were consistent with the findings from previous studies. According to the participants, low-performing students in the ninth grade projected a mind-set of failure. Because these students believed they would not do well in class, they stopped trying to perform in class and resorted to exerting minimum effort to complete course requirements. This finding aligned with Fredrick et al.'s (2004) definition of a cognitively engaged student. In contrast to the low-performing student, the cognitively engaged student displays the willingness to exert the effort to learn and understand complex ideas and skills.

Fredrick et al.'s (2004) definition of affective or emotional engagement was consistent with how the study participants described the engagement of low-performing students. Fredrick et al. defined emotional engagement as having ties to the school as an institution through relationships and interactions with teachers, school staff, and other students. The current study participants described low-performing students as detached from the classroom. The teachers also stated that at-risk students were not always the ones who displayed behavioral or disciplinary issues in class, but the problems sometimes manifested when the student was too passive or reserved in class.

Apart from the findings corresponding to the two research questions, the participants highlighted the importance of boosting student engagement. The current study focused on ninth grade, which is the transitional point between middle school and high school and is one of the most critical developmental phases that students experience (Longobardi et al., 2016). This level is characterized by academic, social, behavioral, and emotional changes, and participants reported that students need to have the skills to cope

with these stressors. For example, one participant mentioned that some students do not know how to manage their time properly, which results in the failure to complete learning activities. This observation was made in the classroom, where the teacher was present to supervise. If the student could not manage his or her time properly under supervision, it raised the question of whether the student could practice time management on his or her own.

Based on these observations from the participants, the institution of life skills programs to help students develop the skills they needed to cope with the stressors of transitioning from middle school to high school. Some participants observed that when students could accomplish tasks in school, it created positive feelings in students that resulted in an increased engagement. This finding was concurrent with the result of a previous study showing that a student's self-perceived ability to cope with and succeed despite adversity in their school experiences was linked to achievement (Collie et al., 2015). Similarly, equipping the students with the necessary skills to manage their high school experience could help them fulfill their academic obligations while developing more productive relationships with peers and teachers.

The cyclical nature of the relationship between achievement and engagement leads to the theory that increasing student ability to achieve academic goals can lead to increased engagement, which can lead to improved school performance (Collie et al., 2015). Likewise, Bilge et al. (2014) found that participants who reported better study habits and self-efficacy were more likely to report higher levels of engagement. This

recommendation will be discussed in further detail in the recommendations and implications sections.

Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of the study was that the results could not be generalized to other U.S. ninth-grade students because the participants were only recruited from a particular area. However, in the course of data analysis, the research context was also explicitly described so that the transferability of the results could be more accurately determined (see Connelly, 2016). The findings of this study were based on data from a small sample size; however, researchers could use the narratives to determine the transferability of the results to other contexts. The results of this study did not derive any conclusions about the predictive relationships between the variables (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Rather, the data and results in this study were purely observations and perceptions from the participants' experiences working with ninth-grade students. Lastly, the trustworthiness of the study results was enhanced through data triangulation of multiple data sources.

Recommendations

A key limitation of this study was one using a small sample size from a specific geographical location, which limited the generalizability of the study results. In line with this, I recommend that future researchers should replicate this qualitative study with ninth-grade teachers in other areas of the United States to determine if the results would be replicated in other areas. The replication of the findings from this study may enhance the generalizability of study findings.

Previous researchers have shown factors contributing to the relationship between student engagement, performance, and achievement (Reeve, 2012; Reyes et al., 2012); however, there is a need to explore the factors that affect the engagement and performance of low-performing students (Henry et al., 2012; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). The results of the data analysis for this current study have indicated several factors that are related to poor academic performance among ninth-grade students. First, the importance of support, both from parents and teachers, was noted. Based on this, future researchers should conduct a quantitative study to ascertain the existence and nature of statistically significant relationships between variables such as student engagement, parental support, and teacher support. Determining the empirical relationships between these variables can provide more evidence for drafting specific practical policies to improve student engagement.

A review of existing literature also indicated a mutually predictive relationship between engagement and academic success, but there is a variability regarding the grade level (Chase et al., 2014). Therefore, future researchers should conduct a quantitative study measuring the nature of the relationship between student engagement and academic success, particularly among ninth-grade students. Such a study would contribute to current knowledge on student engagement for ninth-grade students, which could lead to specific practical recommendations on how to increase student engagement for this particular level.

Implications

Researchers have stated the poor academic performance of students is an educational concern for teachers, curriculum developers, and school leaders, leading to increased research among the possible causes of poor academic performance among students (Alami, 2016; Ickovics et al., 2014; Peters & Woolley, 2015; Zakariya & Bamidele, 2015). The findings of this study were of importance for families (parents and guardians), teachers, and school policy makers.

First, the importance of parental involvement and support was indicated by the data analysis results and supported by assertions from previous studies. Thus, leaders of schools should implement programs to strengthen relationships between the school, the teachers, and the parents to address better the needs and concerns of ninth-grade students, particularly those classified as at-risk (Coleman, 2018).

The importance of the teacher-student relationship was also found as a significant predictor of academic achievement in a previous study (Longobardi et al., 2016) and a factor that causes poor academic performance in ninth-grade students in this study. As such, teachers must develop a strong, positive relationship with their students. Thus, new teachers need the proper training on how to reach out and establish strong, positive, and professional relationships with their students to increase student engagement and ultimately, academic achievement.

Lastly, school leaders should implement a life skills program to equip students with the basic skills they need to cope with the rigors of high school (Yeager, 2017). The life skills programs can include teaching stress management, time management, self-

discipline, and study habits. The sense of self-efficacy of students may increase, which will increase student engagement.

Conclusion

Federal mandates on academic achievement have increased research on student engagement and its antecedents. Student engagement at the ninth-grade level, particularly for at-risk students, is critical for increasing academic performance. The results of this study indicated the importance of parents and teachers supporting students developing basic skills to cope with the rigors of high school. However, I recommend further research on the subject to add to the body of knowledge on student engagement among low-performing students in ninth grade.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. In your opinion, how would you describe the common challenges experienced by underachieving students in your class?
2. In your opinion, what do you think are the causes of the less than proficient academic performance of low-achieving children in your class?
3. In your opinion, how important is student's participation for you as a teacher?
4. In your opinion, what do you think is the role of cognitive engagement among low-achieving ninth-grade students?
5. In your opinion, what do you think is the role of emotional engagement among low-achieving ninth-grade students?
6. In your opinion, what do you think is the role of behavioral engagement among underachieving ninth-grade students?
7. Do you have anything else to share that we did not discuss that is relevant to the topic of the study?

Appendix B: Observation Sheet

	Notes
Teacher behaviors regarding student questions	
Teacher instructional practices	
Interaction with students	
Cognitive Engagement with students during lecture	
Behavioral Engagement with students during lecture	
Emotional Engagement with students during lecture	

Appendix C: Approval Letter from the School District

December 6, 2017

Dear Enock Alcine,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give you permission for you to conduct the study entitled, Academic Performance and Student Engagement Among Ninth-Grade Students within the School District. As part of this study, I authorize you to invite eligible participants by visiting a few high schools within the district. You will explain and briefly discuss the study to potential participants. Your email should be given so that interested individuals can contact you regarding their participation in your study. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: allowing you to contact the principals of these high schools, and interview our teachers and conduct classroom observation. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I understand that you will not be naming our organization in the doctoral project report that is published in ProQuest. I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

Superintendent of Public Schools