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Finding Motivation and Connectedness for Learning with Special Education Students Qualifying Under Emotional Disturbance

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Finding Motivation and Connectedness for Learning with Special Education Students

Qualifying Under Emotional Disturbance

by

Nikole Denton

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2022
Abstract

The purpose of this research seeks to understand the conditions for motivation among disengaged high school students in special education who qualify under emotional disturbance (ED) and support them in rediscovering their desire for learning while also determining how educators can be supportive in cultivating academic engagement and agency. The theoretical framework looks toward co-created curriculum through an understanding of intrinsic motivation (Ryan et al., 2021), self-Determination theory (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), and critical pedagogy (Shih, 2018). Currently, there is a lack of empirical research on the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches in determining what works in engaging special education students who qualify under emotional disturbance (ED) with learning in an academic setting (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016).

To research the change of academic motivation in special education high school students who qualify under ED, the researcher conducted an exploratory mixed methods study with pragmatic and constructivist worldviews. The researcher worked with five high school students, through an adapted Participatory Action approach. The findings revealed that community and peer learning is particularly important for students with ED. Students reported a high degree of value when understanding the why of learning.

The research found that student interests, both inside and outside of the classroom, were important to co-creating curriculum. It was by this process that engagement through community emerged, impactful learning was co-developed, and the learning itself discovered a newly sense of purpose.
Acknowledgements

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**Table of Contents**

Abstract ....................................................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................................... iv
List of Figures ............................................................................................................................................ vii
List of Tables ............................................................................................................................................ viii
Preface .......................................................................................................................................................... 1

**Chapter 1: Introduction** ............................................................................................................................. 3
  Statement of Purpose .................................................................................................................................... 3
  Overview of the Research Design ................................................................................................................. 4
  Significance of the Study ............................................................................................................................... 5
  Research Implications ................................................................................................................................ 5

**Chapter 2: Literature Review** .................................................................................................................... 7
  Self-Determination Theory .......................................................................................................................... 8
    Fundamental Psychological Needs of Self-Determination Theory ............................................................ 9
    SDT Taxonomy of Motivation .................................................................................................................. 12
    SDT and Academics .................................................................................................................................. 15
  Measuring Student Performance ................................................................................................................. 18
    Self-Determination and ED Student ....................................................................................................... 19
  Critical Pedagogy ........................................................................................................................................ 20
  Participatory Action Research ..................................................................................................................... 23
  Conclusion .............................................................................................................................................. 25

**Chapter 3: Methods** .................................................................................................................................. 27
  Research Questions ..................................................................................................................................... 27
  Description and Rationale for Research Approach .................................................................................... 27
  Research Design .......................................................................................................................................... 29
    Research Site and Entry into the Field ..................................................................................................... 30
    Participants and Sampling Procedure ................................................................................................... 30
  Methods ....................................................................................................................................................... 31
  Data Analysis ............................................................................................................................................ 32
  Validity ....................................................................................................................................................... 33

**Chapter 4: Findings** .................................................................................................................................. 36
  Community Creates Collective Interest and Motivation ........................................................................... 36
  Rapport Leaders ........................................................................................................................................ 37
List of Figures

Figure 1 Matchbox car ................................................................. 38
Figure 2 Students painting matchbox car ........................................ 39
Figure 3 Student cutting off match tips for matchbox car project .......... 39
Figure 4 String of matches and the matchbox car ignited .................. 40
Figure 5 Spartan’s utility box artwork. Used with Spartan’s permission 44
Figure 6 Spartan’s 3x drawing. Used with Spartan’s permission .......... 47
List of Tables

Table 1 Adapted from Self-Determination Theory’s Taxonomy of Motivation .......................... 12
Preface

What’s wrong with me? Why do I have to work and study so much harder than my friends, and I get worse grades? What’s wrong with my brain? Why can’t I figure out how to read new words? Why am I so stupid? I’ll read ahead so no one knows how dumb I am. These are some of the thoughts I had throughout my schooling. I was never tested for special education, but I always felt there was something “wrong” with me and that I was stupid. When asked what I wanted to do with my life, what my passion was, I never had an answer.

Little did I know that life would guide me to being a special education teacher at forty-one years old, and for the first time I felt like I was doing the job I was meant to do. I connected with my students and understood how they felt. I longed for them to know that their grades didn’t define them and for them to believe this. I wanted to prove to them how smart they were, sometimes in unconventional ways. Many had given up on the joy of learning, didn’t care if they learned anything, and were plugging along academically for a diploma. It was a daily struggle for them, and I was troubled to see them so academically dejected. I often lowered the academic expectations so they could graduate, knowing this wasn’t the best solution.

I entered my graduate program thinking I’d figure out how to motivate my students into learning, that I’d discover how to make learning fun for them, and that I’d walk away with the answers. I thought I’d help them, and that it’d be me instilling knowledge to them and unlocking their joy for learning again. What I gained is a new educational philosophy, one where my students were my teachers, and I was the student learning from them. I asked them questions, listened, learned, and discovered with them. I was finally studying something that directly impacted me and my students’ lives, and my love for learning was inspired. I was finally learning because I was excited about my learning and not to satisfy a teacher, achieve a grade, or
a diploma. Through this process, I discerned that I didn’t have the answers, and I didn’t need to. This freedom was frightening and exhilarating. As I continue to explore, fumble, and grow in this new knowledge, my greatest hope is that I can support my students so they will find their love for learning again.
Chapter 1: Introduction

As a teacher who has been working with special education students for seven years and in a therapeutic classroom with students who qualify under emotional disturbance (ED) for the past three years, I have experienced an environment of disengaged learners trudging along for a diploma. Prior to teaching special education, I taught English in a small outdoor education program for five years, and the students were excited and engaged in their learning. In this program, the students chose a community service and career exploration placement to attend on Tuesdays. They participated as leaders at a ropes course throughout the year, and their academics connected to the outdoors and their future.

Then I started working with special education students who qualify under ED and observed their learning was static and disengaging. Most students were completing their academics utilizing an online program providing video recorded teacher lessons that included questions students had to answer and assessments students had to take. Having experienced the engagement of student learning, I believed my current students could achieve the same engagement as my students in the outdoor program. I just needed to know how to generate a curriculum that facilitated their engagement.

Statement of Purpose

To the date of this project, there has been little research on how students with ED are academically motivated. The literature has provided models of intrinsic and extrinsic factors of motivation generally and with students broadly but has focused little on special education or ED students specifically. In particular, this project drew from the frameworks for Self-determination theory (SDT), established by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). SDT taxonomy of motivation reveals the varying levels of motivation, and how students’
learning is affected by them. According to Frazier (2015), the fundamental psychological needs for students to be academically motivated are autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

Furthermore, the research led to Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy and participatory action research (PAR) groups in inciting change through learning. The researcher linked Freire’s principles of critical pedagogy and students with ED’s learning. According to Tarlau (2014), Freire wanted to awaken the critical consciousness of the illiterate and oppressed Brazilian people, and likewise it became evident that students with ED needed their academic oppression liberated. Shih (2018) elucidates that Freire’s critical pedagogy is one where students are co-creators of knowledge, that they take an active role in their learning, and that they are not empty vessels to be filled. Brydon-Miller and Maguire (2009) describe the purpose of PAR is to eliminate the institutional power dynamic and evoke change through dialogue between the researcher and participants allowing the participants to become co-researchers. The resulting praxis is that by having students engage in a PAR group where the teacher-researcher collaborates with them to establish a problem, take action, and participate in reflection, students can become agents of their own learning, knowledge, and advocacy.

**Overview of the Research Design**

The study utilized an exploratory mixed methods study, with pragmatic and constructivist worldviews, and based in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. The qualitative data came in the form of open-ended interviews, curricular projects, and observations, while the quantitative data came through surveys and was used to gain a numerical description of the trends in the students’ views of how their engagement changed.

The primary research questions center around the inquiry as to what are the conditions for motivation among disengaged high school students in special education who qualify under ED,
and how teachers can support them in rediscovering their desire for learning through a PAR group, critical pedagogy, and principles of SDT? Secondly, the research sought to understand how educators, who work with high school special education students with ED, can support these students in cultivating academic engagement and agency, and to co-create curriculum to support their intrinsic motivation for learning?

The research site was focused in a special education therapeutic classroom at a public high school in northern California with students in the classroom participating in the study, and included eight students in the pre-survey and a self-selecting cohort of six students in the PAR curricular co-design process. The researcher was also the teacher in the classroom and worked at the site for three years.

**Significance of the Study**

Findings from the research study indicate that special education students who qualify under ED are motivated to learn when they can work with others in their community, when the reason for their learning is evident, and when the learning is short and impactful. Also, when students had an opportunity to create curriculum, they felt more connected to the purpose for learning and consequently engaged with the process, which contrasts with much of the standard academic curriculum to which they do not understand the purpose. Finally, when students participated in learning that did not take too long and was impactful, they remained focused on their work and felt a sense of accomplishment upon completion of their work.

**Research Implications**

The data revealed that students’ perceptions for academic engagement increased after participating in the PAR group and they had agency in their learning. There are myriad ways to ensure students with ED can engage in student-driven learning. For example, in the classroom
teachers can engage students in developing curriculum that is meaningful and engaging. Teachers can do this by developing relationships with their students, eliciting their interests, and asking students what problems they see that need solving. In schools, administrators can support teachers who are manifesting student-driven curriculum and have them coach other teachers desiring to participate in this type of teaching. Administrators can take time to listen to students’ concerns and give a place for their voices to be heard. Lastly, education policy needs to support student-driven learning so that students remain engaged in their learning. Education policy needs to bring back the joy of learning for all students, especially special education students who qualify under emotional disturbance.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, emotional disturbance (ED) is defined as a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance: (a) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; (b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; (c) inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (d) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; (e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C § 300.8 (2004)).

The purpose of this literature review seeks to understand the conditions for motivation among disengaged high school students in special education who qualify under ED and support them in rediscovering their desire for learning. This research project attempts to uncover, as the primary research question, how educators who work with high school special education students with ED can support them in cultivating academic engagement and autonomy, and to co-create curriculum to support their intrinsic motivation for learning. Due to a lack of research on how students with ED are academically motivated, this review begins by looking at the historical trends in the dropout rate of special education students who qualify under emotional disturbance, and then explores how to support unmotivated students with emotional disturbance in increasing their motivation through self-determination theory (SDT), critical pedagogy (CP), and participatory action research (PAR).
Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory, which was established by psychologist Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, looks at how individuals are motivated or from where their self-determination derives. They wanted to understand the reasons behind why some people are motivated and others are not. Deci and Ryan (2021) developed the taxonomy around three areas of motivation: intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation (Ryan et al., 2021).

However, there is little research on how ED and special needs students match to this model (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016). Sullivan and Sadeh (2016) also document that ED students have a higher dropout rate and need to be better supported in the classrooms. Consequently, the question arises of how teachers can better academically support students who qualify under emotional disturbance in the classroom, so students are not only motivated to graduate high school but also become engaged in and agents of their learning.

Although Cammarota (2008) focuses on “Cultural Therapy as a form of empowerment” (p. 45) in the Latino population, one can connect similar insights for students with ED in that there are inaccurate judgments adults make about students’ learning that they are not aware is happening. Based on these beliefs, some students with ED are expected to learn in a way that is disengaging and unfulfilling, driving them to be unmotivated and detached from their learning. Cammarota (2008) purports the value of praxis-based pedagogy: “Dialogue, regarding the act of recreation, initiates transformative processes that not only improve school conditions but also produce empowered youth subjectivities and agencies” (p. 49). Dialogue can facilitate the change that certain students need to authentically engage in their academic work, as is particularly important and often overlooked in relation to empowering ED students with their own learning.
**Fundamental Psychological Needs of Self-Determination Theory**

Deci and Ryan (1985) established that humans achieve and produce at their best when they are motivated, and to have this type of motivation they need their basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence met. Sansone and Tang (2021) posit that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) changed the thinking for extrinsic motivation, which was previously thought about solely as external reasonings whereas SDT extrinsic motivation is established as being driven by internal beliefs.

Niemiec and Ryan (2009) explain that SDT propose that people are inherently curious about their world and enjoy learning, so it would seem that teaching kids to learn would be easy; however, because teachers and parents place extrinsic motivations to learning, students often become bored, anxious, or alienated. According to Frazier (2015) the fundamental psychological needs for students to be academically motivated are autonomy, relatedness, and competence. If students don’t have these needs met, their academic motivation can dwindle (Ryan et al., 2021).

**Autonomy.** Ryan et al. (2021) states that students need autonomy in their learning – to feel a sense of governing their learning for their interests in the learning to continue. Ryan et al. (2021) continues to claim that “When acting with autonomy, a person is fully functioning, willingly engaged in activity with awareness and congruence, and able to harness vitality in the self-regulation of action” (p. 98). Teachers who feel pressure from their administration and state through state standards to enforce certain learning and specific outcomes do not feel autonomous and therefore do not foster autonomy. “Students’ autonomy can be supported by teachers’ minimizing the salience of evaluative pressure and any sense of coercion in the classroom, as well as by maximizing students’ perceptions of having a voice and choice in those academic activities in which they are engaged” (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009, p. 139). Therefore, it is vital for
teachers to move away from standards-based evaluative feedback and move toward descriptive feedback that explores students’ autonomy. Additionally, for academic engagement, students need to have a say in academic activities. Some “strategies for enhancing autonomy include providing choice and meaningful rationales for learning activities, acknowledging students’ feelings about those topics, and minimizing pressure and control” (Niemiec & Ryan, 2021, p. 141).

**Relatedness.** Niemiec and Ryan (2021) note that to be motivated, students need to feel connected to others and have a feeling of belonging, and they need to feel that others care about, value, and like them. Similarly, Ryan et al. (2021) explains how “Relatedness, one of SDT’s three basic psychological needs, is critical to explain people’s motivation to be close, disclose, and care for others” (102). Niemiec and Ryan (2021) continue to report that the more students have a sense of relatedness, the more intrinsic motivation they have and the more willing they are to perform more mundane tasks.

**Important Relationships.** Frazier (2015) explains that students need to feel connected to their teachers in that they feel authentically valued and respected by their teachers, and it is through this relatedness that they can utilize integrated or identified regulation and thrive academically. When a teacher has a connection with their students, they are more in tune to know the level of academic difficulty a student can manage (Frazier, 2015). Also, when issues arise, if there is relatedness, the teacher can work with the student to resolve challenges due to the established relationship (Frazier, 2015). Adversely, if students do not feel connected with their teachers, they tend to move toward introjection and external regulation leading to negative academic outcomes. There are many ways to connect with students, like greeting them when they enter the room, asking about their hobbies, checking in to see how they are doing, or giving
a “get to know you survey” at the start of each year or semester. Other “strategies for enhancing relatedness include conveying warmth, caring, and respect to students” (Niemiec & Ryan, 2021, p. 141). It is understandable that when teachers have one hundred and eighty or more students they see in a day, the responsibility to connect with each student could leave them feeling overwhelmed. Adding to this the requirement of state standards that all students must meet might make connecting with each student feel impossible for teachers, which is why it is important for teachers to consider these findings with the students who are the most disengaged, in hope to engage and motivate them. Sometimes a warm smile is enough to connect with a student and make them feel like you care about them.

**Competence.** Another area where students become academically disengaged is in their feelings of competence, where: “competence refers to the experience of behavior as effectively enacted” (Niemiec & Ryan, 2021, p. 135). Niemiec and Ryan (2021) further explained that if students feel academic material is too difficult or too simple, they do not value trying and give up or become disengaged. They further postulate that to keep students engaged, teachers can provide material that is optimally challenging to students, and they can provide feedback that focuses on students’ efficacy and areas of continued learning for mastery instead of through evaluation. Often when students feel the academic work is too difficult, they feel incompetent and question their intelligence, and they feel inadequate and can spiral into negative self-talk. Niemiec and Ryan (2021) theorize that even students as young as kindergarten can have feelings of incompetence, setting them up for a negative school experience, necessitating teachers to be aware of how students are engaging in their academics. Niemiec and Ryan (2021) also note that if students are struggling with competence, these students can be supported through scaffolding techniques and collaboration that focuses on the students’ strengths. More “strategies for
enhancing competence include providing effectance-relevant, as opposed to norm-based evaluative, feedback and optimally challenging tasks” (Niemiec & Ryan, 2021, p. 141). For example, giving positive feedback as praise and highlighting student strengths pertaining to their work increases competence so students feel able to meet academic challenges.

**SDT Taxonomy of Motivation**

Ryan et al. (2021) analyzes Self-Determination Theory taxonomy of motivation with three overarching motivation categories: Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, and Amotivation. According to this framework, amotivation and intrinsic motivation are distinct categories; however, extrinsic motivation has four subcategories under it, which will be explained in greater detail below: 1. External regulation, which is the closest to amotivation without being amotivation, 2. Introjection, 3. Identification, and 4. Integration, which is the closest to intrinsic motivation without being intrinsic motivation.

*Table 1 Adapted from Self-Determination Theory’s Taxonomy of Motivation (Ryan et al., 2021)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amotivation</th>
<th>Extrinsic Motivation</th>
<th>Intrinsic Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External Regulation</td>
<td>Introjection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of motivation.</td>
<td>Participates because of reward or punishment from an external source.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introjection</td>
<td>Participates for ego or self-esteem to impress others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Intrinsic Motivation.** Intrinsic motivation “involves the doing of any activity for its own sake or because the activity is interesting or enjoyable” (Ryan et al., 2021, p. 99, as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2020). Intrinsic motivation is the most important method for people to be motivated and successful; however, rarely do they operate from intrinsic motivation. Activities people engage
in during their free time are intrinsically motivated, such as exploring nature, traveling, reading, or watching TV, to name a few.

**Extrinsic Motivation.** Extrinsic motivation within SDT is, “understood as a broad category and concerns all “instrumental” activities, or behaviors done to obtain some separable consequence” (Ryan et al., 2021, p. 99). Typically, people are externally motivated by integration, identification, or introjection regulation, which is outlined in the table above.

As seen in the table above, Ryan et al. (2021) outlines the continuum of motivation ranging from intrinsic motivation to amotivation, along with the four regulations within extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is motivation coming from within and when there is an internal “perceived locus of causality (PLOC)”, and the activity or task is done out of interests, enjoyment, and inherent satisfaction; “when intrinsically motivated, people curiously engage their internal and external environments, reflecting an inherent inclination toward learning and mastery” (p. 99). The SDT continuum shows four regulations of extrinsic motivation: integration, identification, introjection, and external regulation, which is explained in more detail.

**External Regulation.** External regulation has low autonomy and thus the motivation must come from outside of the individual, which could be in the form of rewards or punishments. Ryan et al. (2021) states that when this is the principal form of motivation, it can be powerful in motivating immediate behavior; however, that behavior is poorly maintained when the extrinsic regulation is not present. There is usually no behavioral change with extrinsic regulation as the individual is focused on the reward or to skirt punishment (Ryan et al., 2021). Additionally, extrinsic regulation diminishes intrinsic motivation, which is why attributing grades can negatively affect internal motivation in the academic setting. To many students the use of grades
activates anxiety about failing; the motive is avoiding failure (Ryan et al. 2021). Grades may encourage an emphasis on quantitative aspects of learning, depress creativity, foster fear of failure, and undermine interest” (Butler & Mordecai, 1986, p. 215). For example, a student studies for a test to avoid the punishment that ensues with a bad test grade. In this situation, the student studies to avoid punishment, but maintains little value for academic learning.

**Introjection Regulation.** Introjection regulation is another form of external motivation and is an extensive motivational category where the ego or self-esteem is involved, so a person behaves to impress others or to avoid shame or guilt. “Introjection is also a controlled form of internalization because even though the contingency driving behavior is “within” the person, the PLOC is still phenomenally external; there is an experience of pressure on the self to act or face the affective and self-evaluative consequences” (Ryan et al., 2021, p. 99). For example, a student studies for a test so their friends view them as studious. In this situation, the student is studying for ego and self-esteem.

**Identification Regulation.** Moving closer to internal regulation is identification regulation, which is when the individual has accepted the reason for behaving as their own, or they identify with the importance of the behavior (Ryan et al., 2021). With this behavior, the person is not doing it for an external reward or due to guilt, shame or approval, but they might not enjoy the behavior either. Also, the behavior might not align with other areas or aspects of their lives, so the person might experience inner conflict. For example, a student studies for a test because they believe it is important for their future college endeavors. The student is studying so they can achieve a goal they believe is important. Students need to connect that what they are learning relates to their lives for motivation to be present and facilitate the process of internalization (Frazier, 2015). Although it is external motivation, this is what keeps most
students plugging along their academic journey. Too often they have been told they must
graduate high school, go to college to get a good job, nice car, big house, lovely family, which
all equates to happiness. However, this is not true for all students. Those students who keep
plugging along even when they do not have autonomy or feel engaged in their learning have
subscribed to this narrative and operate under identification regulation as it has become their
personal belief to do well academically for a better future. However, those students who give up
on this narrative are visibly disengaged in their academics (Frazier, 2015), and educators are left
trying to find ways to motivate those students who are disengaged, which can lead to frustration,
burnout, and disregard for the students who need them the most.

**Integrated Regulation.** The last extrinsic motivation is integrated regulation, which is
when the behavior aligns completely with the beliefs and values of the individual without
conflict and the PLOC is intrinsic motivation. It is still not considered intrinsic because there is
no inherent enjoyment in the activity, but because it aligns so universally with the person’s
beliefs and values, it can present as internal regulation (Ryan et al., 2021). For example, a
student studies for a test because they enjoy learning and believe it will give them a better life.

**Amotivation.** According to Ryan et al. (2021), amotivation is a lack of motivation due to
lack of competence or self-efficacy, value or relevance, or through learned helplessness.
Someone operating out of amotivation has an impersonal PLOC, which means the impetus or
rationale behind the behavior is not coming from within them.

**SDT and Academics**

This inspires the conversation concerning motivation and academics. Howard et al.
(2021) tested to see if Self-Determination Theory’s range of motivation held true in the
educational setting, but not specifically with special education students with ED. They looked at
student outcomes based on academic achievement as measured by grade point average (GPA); persistence in relation to how students participate as measured by engagement, attendance, intentions of dropping out, etc.; wellbeing as measured by social-emotional behavior and how well students navigate interpersonal interactions; goal orientations measured by performance approach/avoidance and mastery approach/avoidance; and self-evaluation as seen in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-image. The meta-analysis supported the different motivation types outlined in Self-Determination Theory and determined that student performance was “in line with theoretical expectations, adaptive outcomes were generally associated with more self-determined forms of motivation, and less self-determined motives were generally associated with more maladaptive indicators (Howard et al., 2021, p.18). It is important to note that although integrated regulation is included in SDT’s continuum of motivation, Howard et al. (2021) did not include integrated regulation in their study, and the level of extrinsic motivation closest to intrinsic motivation they included was identified regulation. In their study, they found that students had the highest self-esteem, self-efficacy, and highest physical-image positivity when they were operating under identified regulation.

Howard et al. (2021) discovered that identified regulation was associated with outcomes as strong or stronger than intrinsic motivation even though it is inherently an extrinsic type of motivation. They posit that this is due to the nature of intrinsic motivation depending on curiosity and enjoyment and relating to a limited type of behavior, where identified regulation has a broader range of behaviors that are both intrinsic and extrinsic and dependent on persistence for the extrinsic behaviors. Howard et al. (2021) also found that “introjection positively relates to education-focused behaviors including effort, engagement, and physical exercise but will likely coincide with notable negative side effects including anxiety and negative affect” (p. 19). Their
results showed that introjection negatively affects students as they age. Since introjection regulation is ego driven, it is logical that as children age, they become more aware of their peers and evaluation of self to peers, which can lead to low self-esteem (Howard et al., 2021). Finally, Howard et al. (2021) discovered that instead of positively motivating students, external regulation may threaten student wellbeing causing anxiety and reduced social-emotional functioning. This is important because previous thoughts on external motivation believed it would gain a positive result in the moment; however, the detrimental effect was not recognized. With this information, it is imperative to see that motivating students through external means harms them. So, what does this mean in the classroom? These findings show that for ideal student engagement, students need academics that foster the enjoyment of intrinsic motivation plus the meaningfulness of introjected regulation along with the feeling of autonomy, but with the lack of controlled language and behavior from teachers and parents.

Niemiec and Ryan (2009) postulate that in today’s educational climate of standardized testing, schools operate under circumstances of control, not only for students but also for teachers. They claim that students are forced to learn based on a specific set of standards that may or may not have meaning to them, and students are removed from the decision making of their education and have little to no autonomy in the process, thus increasing their disengagement. Teachers have also lost autonomy in their curriculum because governments are mandating what students need to know, teachers are accountable to their administrators to make sure students are meeting these standards, and because of this system, many students are bored, disengaged, or anxious about learning Niemiec and Ryan (2009). Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to provide student autonomy to the curriculum when possible, by offering students a
sense of ownership in their learning through choice, relevant learning activities, acknowledging student feelings, and decreasing pressure and control.

**Measuring Student Performance**

Butler and Mordecai (1986) determined how feedback, grades, and no feedback affected student performance over three tasks in an effort to prove intrinsic motivation. Their findings showed that specific feedback is the most effective means of enhancing student performance and generating intrinsic motivation when evaluating student work. Butler and Mordecai (1986) also discovered that grades will motivate some students but not all of them, and those it motivates at first might lose their aspiration to be motivated by grades. Finally, they established that the lack of feedback is useless for students’ academic growth; hence, if teachers are not going to give feedback to students, then they should not give the assignment. Butler and Mordecai (1986) explain need achievement as achievement based on the desire to succeed or avoid failure, and they describe how “Need achievement may well be the motive routinely dominant in school settings, unless interest is exceptionally high. In addition, in many students the use of grades seems to activate the anxiety behind the motive to avoid failure” (215). Butler and Mordecai (1986) also found that “grades may encourage an emphasis on quantitative aspects of learning, depress creativity, foster fear of failure, and undermine interest” (p. 215). Considering this, it is discouraging that grades are the basis of how schools operate, and it is no wonder that kids struggle to remain intrinsically engaged in their academic learning. The intention of creating a PAR group and working with students in this capacity is to break the rigid hierarchical grade determined educational structure and co-develop curriculum that they find engaging and meaningful. Through their participation in generating research questions, identifying their
interests, generating curriculum, and reflecting on their experience of learning, the hope is that students will find their intrinsic motivation for learning again.

**Self-Determination and ED Student**

Carter et al. (2006) conducted a quantitative study of eighty-five, 9-12th grade ED and learning disabled (LD) students and their self-determination. They used the *AIR Self-determination scale*, which students, parents, and special educators filled out, and “is an assessment instrument designed to measure a students' capacity for and opportunity to engage in self-determined behavior” (Carter et al., 2006, p. 337). They found that students with ED had limited capacity to engage in self-determination behavior but were unclear if it is inherent in the student or based on the lack of opportunities provided by the educators. In this study, special education educators and parents rated students with ED as having lower self-determination than those of LD students. Special education teachers also rated students with ED lower than the students themselves did, whereas students with LD were more aligned. Based on this information, can one assume that adults are assuming lower levels of self-determination in students with ED and limiting their capacity for self-determination behaviors, expecting less than the students can achieve. This begs the question that if educators examine their inaccurate beliefs concerning the self-determination of students with ED and provide them more explicit opportunity to exercise their self-determination, would the students follow through? Moreover, how often are educators allowing students who qualify under ED the opportunity to engage in self-determination behaviors? Additionally, one must wonder, if given the opportunity, how their self-determination would show up in their academics.

Carter et al. findings brought to attention that students with ED may benefit from “additional curricular attention on and explicit instruction in self-determination components such
as goal setting, choice making, problem-solving, and self-evaluation” (Carter et al., 2006, p. 341). Also, the findings show that students with ED felt they did not have opportunities to show self-determination whereas students with LD felt they had more opportunities; however, the surveyed adults felt the students with ED had opportunities at home and school to show self-determination behaviors, but the students did not show these behaviors when given the opportunity. Lastly, they found that “skill development and provision of opportunities have to be combined into intervention efforts” (Carter et al., 2006, p. 342). Therefore, just providing self-determination skill development without opportunities to practice those skills, or just providing opportunities to show self-determination behaviors without teaching self-determination skills are not effective in and of themselves, and they must be combined for self-determination behaviors to develop. The unanswered question in this study is what do students with ED need to feel they have had opportunities to show self-determination? Were they given autonomy, did they have relatedness, or did they feel competent in their opportunities? As previously explained, it is evident how crucial those factors are in self-determination. Since the study only used rating scales and was not explicitly concerned with academic motivation, there is a gap concerning how student voice and interests impacts their academic motivation, especially with regards their agency in co-created curriculum.

Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire, the founder of critical pedagogy, was a Brazilian educator and philosopher who sought to empower the socially oppressed. Shih (2018) describes the historical context of Brazil during the 1960s, when Freire was writing, how there was a vast economic gap between the rich and the poor, and that there were many illiterate people due to a lack of education. According to Tarlau (2024), Freire sought to narrow that gap by teaching those who were
illiterate to read by awakening their “critical consciousness,” and thereby leading them to take action and improve their situation to create a just democratic society. This thinking was revolutionary and challenged the state power dynamics because the oppressed were learning to read and be educated about their rights, and therefore had the means to fight back against the Brazilian government for these rights. They were awakened to the injustice around them and had the means to contend for change, leading to their liberation. The masses were rising up and the elite in power were frightened, so according to Tarlau (2024), to stop Freire’s movement, he was exiled for 16 years and took refuge in Chile.

Watching special education students with ED and their academic struggle, one can observe their academic oppression and the negative impact it has on the students emotionally, mentally, and physically, leading to exploring solutions as the purpose of this research. Sadly, this population has a high dropout rate (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016). Freire “hoped to awaken the critical consciousness of the oppressed, thus shaping his idea of critical pedagogy” (Shih, 2018, p. 65). Shih (2018) states that Freire wanted the oppressed to change from “being for others” to “being for themselves” (p. 65, as cited in Freire, 1985; Macedo, 2000). This research hopes to change the mindset of students with ED from learning for others to learning for themselves, so they reconnect to their love and passion for learning.

Shih (2018) also points out that “while pedagogy is most simply conceived of as the study of teaching and learning, the term critical pedagogy embodies notions of how one teaches, what is being taught, and how one learns” (p.65). In Freire’s critical pedagogy, students are co-creators of knowledge with a problem-posing method, which elicits student autonomy and agency back into their learning. In critical pedagogy, education is viewed as a practice of freedom where both students and educators raise their awareness, where students are not viewed
as empty vessels waiting to be filled, or viewed through banking education, where information is deposited by the teacher to the students instead of acquiring information through dialogue “minimiz[ing] the learners’ ability to think critically” (Shih, 2018, p. 66). Many teachers don’t know there's another option for teaching and one that engages students, giving them agency in their learning.

According to Shih (2018), Freire believed that problem-posing education strives for empowerment as an aim for education, and what this research hopes to prove through the co-creation of curriculum through participatory action research (PAR) to engage students in their learning again. Freire hoped that through critical pedagogy individuals would be more autonomous and critical thinkers, eliciting change in their situations. Freire also felt that learning was a mutual dialogue between the teacher and the students, and that teachers are also the learners, eliminating the teacher as the authority who could oppress the student. Accordingly, “Through dialogue and problem-posing, teachers and students are engaged in a practice of listening to different perspectives, and naming and transforming the world” (Shih, 2018, p. 67). In this partnership, curriculum becomes applicable not only to the students’ schoolwork but also to their lives, rather than a means of oppression.

Freire believed that education could create social change, and instead of top-down learning, collective learning is emphasized in critical pedagogy. Tarlau (2014) states that, “critical pedagogy is a method of analyzing the oppressive and emancipatory potential of education in all of its forms” (p. 372). The emphasis is that teachers must become the “intellectuals who are actively working to innovate and recreate a rigorous, reflexive, and emancipatory educational process for their students” (Tarlau, 2014, p. 381). It is through critical
pedagogy that students can become engaged in their learning and through doing so find deeper meaning in their lives.

**Participatory Action Research**

According to Brydon-Miller and Maguire (2009), Participatory Action Research (PAR) dates to 1932 and in the Tennessee mountains at Highlander Research and Education Center, formerly Highlander Folkschool. Highlander, which was configured after Scandinavian folk schools, became a point of convergence for researchers and activists involved with issues like civil rights, environmental justice, and labor organizing. Adelman (1993) states that in the late 1930s Kurt Lewin used participatory research and is considered the founder of PAR. Brydon-Miller and Maguire (2009) claim that Marja Liisa Swantz, while working in Tanzania, first used ‘participant research’ formally in the 1970s and that Orlando Fals Borda coined the term.

Brydon-Miller and Maguire (2009) note that: “PAR openly challenges existing structures of power and creates opportunities for the development of innovative and effective solutions to the problems facing our schools and communities” (p. 81). Baum et al. further claim that PAR, “At its heart is collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves” (p. 854). Brydon-Miller and Maguire (2009) suggest that PAR allows the researcher to collaborate with stakeholders to participate in a question, action, reflection cycle to bring about meaningful change to those involved as they define improvement. The purpose of PAR is to bring about change through dialogue between the researcher and participants until the participants become co-researchers, eliminating the institutional power dynamic. Through PAR, the participants are intertwined from the beginning helping to develop the research questions, moving into assisting with data collection, and finally constructing the
analysis. Through this process, participants are empowered and given a sense of agency in the change that manifests.

In the education setting, too often teachers develop curriculum based on standards derived from the government, leaving them feeling like they are losing control of “curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment” (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, p. 85). With standardized testing emanating from the government, teachers are restricted in how they can incorporate PAR into the curriculum:

In the USA, education is rigidly hierarchical in nature, with ever increasing federal government control flowing from the imposition of legislation such as No Child Left Behind, and states and school districts caught in a stranglehold of externally imposed regulations, requirements, curriculum materials, and unfunded mandates. Left out of these draconian mandates is the meaningful inclusion and participation of teachers, parents, children, and other members of the community as informed partners in the educational process. (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, p. 85)

It is through this rigid hierarchical educational structure that teachers might find it difficult to establish PAR in their classrooms, where it is needed the most if they want students to remain engaged in the curriculum. Cammarota (2008) argues that “Schools can stifle young people’s agency for self-determination and social transformation” (p. 56) by stifling their voices and autonomy in learning. Therefore, can educators use PAR groups to empower their students in their learning process, where the students become curriculum designers, establish their learning outcomes, and engage in meaningful learning, and then share with their administration the importance and value of student-driven academics? Currently there is little to no research on using a PAR group with special education students who qualify under ED in the high school
setting to engage their intrinsic motivation for meaningful learning. This project hopes to establish a PAR group where students do just that. Where they engage in co-curriculum development, determine their learning outcomes, and engage in meaningful learning that they will then share with others, specifically the administration, to elicit change. The question arises that if students are responsible for their own learning, how will teachers assess them to substantiate they are meeting the state mandated standards?

**Conclusion**

This literature review reveals that there is little research regarding how special education students with ED best learn in an academic setting. More specifically, there is a gap in how student voice and interests as applied to co-curriculum development might affect academic motivation. It has been documented that it is difficult to know how to facilitate intrinsic motivation for students with ED in the classroom, so they are engaged in their learning. Ryan et al. (2021) propose that internal motivation for learning can be attained through understanding SDT’s taxonomy of motivation and through implementing autonomy, relatedness, and competence when teaching students. However, the question remains if the same theories work on special education students who qualify under ED. Although Freire’s critical pedagogy originated as a political theory to liberate the oppressed for democracy and social justice, this research is examining critical pedagogy and how it relates to the oppression of students with ED as seen in their academic motivation. Critical pedagogy and SDT both conclude that students need to participate in their learning. Freire believed that individuals need to be co-creators of knowledge and collaborators in their learning through a problem-posing method, where there is dialogue, and everyone is voicing their questions and opinions eliciting student autonomy and agency back into their learning. This research is to examine how to ascertain the internal motivation for
learning of special education students who qualify under ED, using a PAR group to implement the theories in SDT and critical pedagogy.
Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this research seeks to understand the conditions for motivation among disengaged high school students in special education who qualify under emotional disturbance (ED) and support them in rediscovering their desire for learning through the concepts of critical pedagogy, a Participatory Action Research (PAR) group, and principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Sullivan and Sadeh (2016) claim there is a lack of empirical research on the effectiveness of interventions to determine what works in keeping ED students engaged in school, and that ED students have a higher rate of dropout and need effective support in the classrooms. Carter et al. (2006) separately found that students with ED had limited capacity to engage in self-determination behavior.

Research Questions

The primary research questions focus on the conditions for motivation among disengaged high school students in special education who qualify under ED, and how teachers can support them in rediscovering their desire for learning through a PAR group, critical pedagogy, and principles of SDT?

Secondly, how can educators who work with high school special education students with ED support these students in cultivating academic engagement and agency, and to co-create curriculum to support their intrinsic motivation for learning?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

To research the change of academic motivation in special education high school students who qualify under ED, the researcher conducted an exploratory mixed methods study with pragmatic and constructivist worldviews. A mixed methods approach was chosen to develop
more complete understandings of changes needed for a special education group and evaluate both the processes and outcomes of a curriculum through PAR (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This methodology involves the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, as well as the analysis and interpretation of both types of data. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it focuses on the meaning the participants hold about issues regarding their academic requirements. It also enabled the provision of a holistic account of the issue under study by reporting multiple perspectives and identifying multiple factors involved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, a quantitative approach was appropriate because the surveys provided a numerical description of the trends in participants’ perception of self-determination and engaged learning.

The researcher collected qualitative data via interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, involving open-ended questions designed to “elicit views and opinions from the participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187). Using critical pedagogy in a PAR group, co-creation of curriculum was developed for students to apply to their learning. The qualitative research was conducted in a natural setting with longitudinal analysis.

The collected quantitative data came from surveys. The purpose of the quantitative data was to determine students’ feelings concerning their voice and motivation in their classes, and whether participation in PAR has an effect on feelings of self-determination and motivation in high school special education students who qualify under ED.

The mixed-method study followed the constructivist and pragmatic philosophical worldviews. The constructivist worldview focuses on the needs of groups and individuals in our society and relies on the participants’ views of the situation being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) states that the “goal of the research [through a
constructivist worldview] is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (p. 8). This research is intended to promote the importance of student voice in the change-making process, in addition to increasing students’ sense of agency and motivation through the inclusion of their voices. A constructivist worldview values participants’ voices in the research process, thus allowing them to improve their own lives. In this study, participants had an opportunity to change their own lives by examining how their sense of agency in creating their curriculum inspired their academic intrinsic motivation.

The pragmatic worldview “arises out of actions, situations, and consequences rather than antecedent conditions” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 10). It stems from the belief that research inquiry is concerned with what works and applies solutions to those problems. In this way, pragmatism focuses on what works and possible solutions, instead of specific methodology. This study is concerned with ideas and programs that increase students’ sense of agency and motivation, and pragmatism supports finding such solutions. This project explored students’ academic motivation prior to and after they engaged in a PAR group to co-create curriculum and ignite their intrinsic academic motivation.

**Research Design**

This research was conducted at a high school in northern California, which will be referred to as Creekside High School. This site was purposefully selected because the researcher has been working at the school for the last three years. Thus, the researcher had pre-existing relationships with the student participants as their primary classroom instructor. Eight students participated in the survey, and six students participated in the co-curricular design unit. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the school and participant names.
Research Site and Entry into the Field

Creekside High School is a local neighborhood high school that has three feeder middle schools with seven feeder elementary schools. The school serves a total of about 1250 students ranging in grades from ninth to twelfth, including two Special Day Classes, one which is a therapeutic classroom, and five resource specialist programs (RSP) serving special education students. Approximately ten percent of the total student population are classified as special education, with fifteen qualifying for the therapeutic classroom, which is the negotiated limit.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

Ninth through twelfth grade students in the researcher’s therapeutic classroom at Creekside High School were recruited for participation in the study. Their ages ranged from fourteen to seventeen years old, thus they were all minors. The sample of eight students from the class participating in the pre-survey included multiple gendered participants and represented multiple racial identities, while a self-selecting cohort of six students participating in the co-curricular design unit were single gendered participants representing one ethnicity. Student participants were solicited through direct invitation after a brief explanation the researcher gave about the study’s purpose and methodology during regular class time. Students were provided with a consent form to be signed by their parents, that also included a line for student assent signatures. As such, the study relied on a convenience population sample based on the number of students who volunteered to participate and received consent from their parents.

These high school students were purposefully selected since the researcher teaches in a therapeutic classroom setting and has observed the lack of academic motivation, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy communicated by these students. The purpose of recruiting students was to comprehend their understandings of engaged learning and their perceptions of their personal
sense of agency. This type of sample was desirable and purposefully chosen given that the participants were students who qualify for special education under the classification of ED. This sample allowed the researcher to “[best] understand the problem and the research question[s]” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 185).

The consent form outlined the study’s purpose, provided methodology and risk information, and detailed how data would be collected and protected. Students who returned the consent form then signed an assent form with the researcher then participated in the interviews, PAR group, and pre- and post-surveys.

**Methods**

Students participated in a Likert-styled baseline survey on how they feel about learning and rating their responses from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree. It was an eleven-question survey, where the last question was a free response question. Questions included such things as: I feel motivated to complete my academics because I enjoy learning the information, and I feel like the lessons/academic content taught in my classes are pertinent to my life (See Appendix B).

Students were then invited to participate in one-on-one interviews conducted on campus at Creekside High School in the researcher’s classroom. All interviews were audio recorded on the researcher’s cell phone, which is password protected. Notes were taken during the interview. Written information never included any names of identifying information (e.g., addresses, phone numbers, personal references). The interviews focused on eliciting views and opinions from the participants such as current feelings regarding school, possibilities for changing their school experience, and options for facilitating that change.

During this research, students formed a PAR group in which they examined what they
found to be effective and ineffective learning strategies in their own experience. With the research, the students then co-created a unit using their principles and strategies for more effective learning. For the following six weeks, the students co-taught that unit, participating in all steps of the process, including designing, teaching, and debriefing.

Students were asked the same survey questions at the end of the six-week unit to determine if there was a shift in their academic motivation. Following the co-research, educational design, and reflection, students were asked if, how, and for whom they might like to share the findings. The students shared their projects with their peers and the classroom staff, and, as part of their research, they also felt it was important to share it with the school administrators. The teacher invited the principal and assistant principal to the classroom where the students had the opportunity to share their learning experiences with them.

Data Analysis

Using a convergent mixed methods design, the qualitative and quantitative data was gathered concurrently. Qualitative data analysis methods were used to analyze the PAR group and interview discussions. All interviews were audio recorded and completely transcribed by the researcher. The researcher wrote analytic memos immediately after the PAR group discussions to capture data about the interactions. Such memos “facilitate [analytic] thinking [about data], stimulating analytic insights” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105).

The transcribed interviews, survey data, and analytic memos from class observations and student conversations were open coded by hand by identifying, first, unexpected codes, and then reviewed for expected codes. The initial coding process was begun inductively with segmenting the text data by identifying key words and phrases. These segments were then labeled with expected codes generated from the literature review that arose in the discussions and interviews.
The researcher looked for significant statements from participants to develop a description of their interests and experiences and to examine any commonalities among them.

The qualitative and quantitative codes were indexed using spreadsheets to organize the data and expedite the pattern searching. Further patterns were found to merge the quantitative data into the qualitative data, thus allowing an integrated data interpretation through a data analysis matrix (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher wrote descriptions of the characteristics and contexts of the themes identified to clarify their connection to the research questions. Then, the data was analyzed through focused coding. Concept mapping was utilized for further explanation of the data by organizing the codes into categories, with the goal of searching for connections or gaps in the data. Themes emerged through the analysis of the concept map and written reflections on the findings.

**Validity**

The researcher is the classroom teacher of the student participants, and the researcher has been working at the school site and in the therapeutic classroom for the last three years. With credentials in English and Special Education, the researcher has worked in the school district for eleven years, initially teaching English in an outdoor education program for five years, then moving to a special education RSP position for three years, and finally teaching in the therapeutic classroom with students who qualify under ED. This may have influenced data collection because the researcher had a personal investment in wanting the PAR project to positively affect her students’ lives. Reactivity is also important to consider, because her role as their teacher influenced the environment that the data was collected in. Another bias was that the researcher wanted her students to connect their understanding of academic motivation with action in creating meaningful curriculum to increase their motivation and sense of agency. The
researcher is aware of her bias and wanted to keep her objectives for the research clear to ensure a valid study. Therefore, the researcher implemented several strategies to address these validity threats.

For one, the researcher conducted repeated observations to check and confirm what was seen and inferred. This is important because it provides more complete data about certain situations (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, it is her third year working at the research site and with some students consistently enrolled every year, so the researcher has maintained intensive, long-term involvement with the student participants. The researcher’s involvement allowed her to develop an in-depth understanding about her participants’ experiences and increased their trust in her (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that strong participant/researcher relationships can lead to more accurate and valid findings.

Qualitative data was collected through observations during the PAR group process, as well as audiotaped and transcribed interviews with student participants. In addition, quantitative data was collected through surveys, given at both the beginning and end of the PAR project. This triangulation of data sources increased the validity of the study because the researcher analyzed data to look for themes that emerged from many sources. This “reduces the risk of chance associations and of systemic biases due to a specific method and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 128). The researcher utilized data through her long-term involvement and intensive interviews. The researcher wrote verbatim transcripts of the interviews and detailed, descriptive notes on her observations, thus providing a full picture of the process (Maxwell, 2013).

During the data analysis process, the researcher was cognizant of searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases to ensure that her bias of wanting the PAR project to improve her
students’ lives did not go unaddressed. The researcher rigorously examined all data to “assess whether it [was] more plausible to retain or modify the conclusion, being aware of all the pressures to ignore data that [did] not fit [her] conclusions” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 127). Lastly, the researcher also used respondent validation to solicit feedback about her conclusions from the participants. This ruled out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what the participants said in the PAR group discussions and interviews (Maxwell, 2013).
Chapter 4: Findings

This research aimed to answer the questions concerning the conditions for motivation among disengaged high school students in special education who qualify under emotional disturbance (ED), and how the researchers can support them in rediscovering their desire for learning through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) group, Critical Pedagogy, and principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). It also examined how educators who work with high school special education students with ED can support these students in cultivating academic engagement and agency, and to co-create curriculum to support their intrinsic motivation for learning. It also explored if special education students who qualify under ED had more autonomy, relatedness, and connectedness in their academics, then they were more motivated and engaged in their learning.

There were several themes that emerged during the research of this project and data analysis. First, students reported that having a feeling of community and belonging while learning was attributed to a positive learning environment and one where learning was enjoyable. Students also voiced a strong sense for needing to understand the why of learning, also indicating that they often feel they are required to participate in learning that does not relate to their lives or present relevance for the future. Finally, the students reported that they become bored with school and what they are expected to learn. They described how they prefer to learn small amounts of impactful information, instead of “a ton of stuff all in your face.”

Community Creates Collective Interest and Motivation

During the interviews, every student participating in the PAR group stated they enjoyed school or school was fun because they got to see, spend time, and collaborate with friends and peers. An eleventh grader named Charles who has been in the therapeutic classroom since ninth
grade and takes all his classes in the therapeutic classroom said, “It’s fun to come [to school] because I have a lot of friends in this class.” Another eleventh grader named Dwight who has been in the therapeutic classroom since tenth grade, takes classes and regularly socializes outside of the therapeutic classroom reported, “I like being with friends… working in a classroom with friends. I like school because I love hanging out with friends.” A ninth grader who takes two classes in the therapeutic classroom named Spartan further shared, “What I like about school is… meeting new people, talk[ing] to them, and making new friends.” Through these comments, one can ascertain how important community and friends are for learning. Although Dwight and Spartan socialize more outside of the therapeutic classroom, all three students discuss how important community is to their learning.

**Rapport Leaders**

In setting up the research, the researcher felt anxious, for fear the students would not want to participate. She first approached Charles and shared the research plan for co-creating curriculum and asked if he would like to participate. He responded, “Well, yeah. I guess so.” Then, when asked, a ninth grader named Arthur responded, “I’ll have to think about it,” which created a hesitancy for Charles who heard Arthur’s response. As a result, Charles changed his mind and said he would also have to think about participating in the group. But things changed constructively when the researcher asked Dwight, who responded, “Well, yeah! Of course, I want to do that.” Charles replied to Dwight, “Yeah, me and Arthur are doing it too!” This surprised the researcher. As a rapport leader in the community, Dwight's enthusiasm was infectious for the culture for learning. Soon, Morgan, Michael, and Spartan also joined the group. Dwight’s leadership created a sense of community raising the collective interest and motivation
in Charles and Arthur, who had been hesitant. Interestingly, once Dwight agreed to participate, the researcher also found she had confidence when asking the other students.

**Catching Fire**

Charles and Dwight are two eleventh graders who, when given choice through the course of this research, chose to work together on their Physics in the Universe class. Charles previously presented the aerodynamics of a Ferrari F8 Tributo, and inspired by the presentation, together they decided to build a model and then study propulsion.

![Figure 1 Matchbox car](image)

Even more interestingly, as they worked on the car, students not participating in the research also felt drawn into their study and wanted to help with the project. The opportunity to work in community, not only tapped into internal motivations, but created a culture for learning together through conversation. Students randomly joined Charles and Dwight in the construction, painting, and theorizing on how well it would work.
And when Dwight and Charles were ready to light the matches on their car, the entire class went outside to observe the results.
In another example of how collective interest and community helps cultivate learning, Morgan, an outgoing ninth grader, enjoys creating electronic rap music. He chose to create music and connect it to science, and two weeks into the project he found a friend who enjoys singing Rap music but who is not involved with the class or PAR group. Together they collaborated on making a song with Morgan, where Morgan created the music, and his friend created the lyrics.

**The Why of Learning Matters**

During the project students often asked, “Why do I need to know this?” when discussing their academics. It became clear that students who did not understand how the information they were learning applied to their life, were more disengaged than those who understood the *why* behind their learning.

The *why* of learning was the most evident finding throughout the project. When students had the opportunity to create curriculum based on their interests, which established meaning in their learning, they found joy and success in learning and wanted to share their learning with those around them. Morgan, who was exasperated with math and his point-slope lessons, shared...
during his interview, “I've been doing y = mx + b for like, almost four years now it seems. I've just kind of like I don't know, I just kind of, my brain shuts off every time I see y = mx + b even though I know how to do it.” He said that he wanted to feel like his time went to good use, and that his time was spent wisely. He communicated that he usually felt that what he is learning has no perceived value now, outside of doing work for a diploma or for his future. When asked what he thought was important to know, he stated, “I feel like financial advice is probably something that should be in schools because that's like really important.”

When asked to develop his curriculum, Morgan wanted to learn more about Bitcoin and cryptocurrency because he feels those are applicable to his life after high school. He’s been researching cryptocurrency and is currently writing a paper about cryptocurrency as his learning objective, which was also his choice. When he was instructed to complete his math work, he communicated that he needed to work on his paper because it was more important. When given a choice of what he wanted to learn, he was more interested in and enthusiastic about learning what he had chosen than his math.

While interviewing Dwight, he similarly communicated that, “There’s no applicable life skills to what’s taught in schools. It’s just information for college, so if you’re not going to college, it’s information that’s not applicable.” When Dwight was asked what he felt would engage him in learning, he shared that he has passion for playing the guitar. He revealed that he had learned to play the guitar by watching YouTube videos, and Dwight’s music teacher said, “Dwight really seems to enjoy playing music, and has strong [guitar] playing skills.” We established that he could explain the history of guitars to map to his learning objectives and his English learning outcome.
Spartan also clearly communicated the disconnect between “school” and his time being valued. He said, “When students can't connect what they’re doing in the classroom with life skills they need to know, they find it disengaging and bland. When they can see the use for the learning in the future, then it’s easy to learn.” His algebra foundations course proved difficult for him and the researcher to co-create curriculum connecting the principles of algebra foundations to his interest in drawing or graphic design that was meaningful to Spartan. The researcher and support staff researched online techniques for applying algebraic principles to graphic design and drawing, but when Spartan was encouraged to also conduct research and devise ways to connect art to algebra, he struggled to do so. This was an interesting finding because it appeared that Spartan wanted the adults to govern his academics and learning. This could be due to years of conditioning and a resulting difficulty for him to move away from this structure of learning. While he initially enjoyed a design project built on algebra, after three weeks of various interventions Spartan found empowerment by having choice in his ability to return to learning math through an online program called Edgenuity. He continues to struggle with focusing on the online program unless a staff member is sitting next to him and supporting him with the learning, but his resistance to learning has diminished and he is more willing when his attention is guided.

**Choice, Right Mindset and “Putting in Work for a Reason”**

The students rated a 2.1 on a 5-point Likert scale when asked if they think school is empowering and whether they feel like they have a choice in their academics and what they are learning. And when asked if the lessons and academic content taught in their classes are pertinent to their lives, they scored a 2.5. Slightly higher, they rated 3.6 when projecting if they had input to their lessons and academic content taught in their classes that they would learn more. As the
researcher expected, the students do not feel they have choice in their learning, potentially leading to a lack of feeling empowered in their learning.

Also, during the interviews, students communicated that their motivation and mindset influenced their learning. They reported that when students are in the right mindset they can learn, but if they’re not motivated, they will be bored and not in a learning mindset. Spartan said, “Learning is awesome and good for your mental health and mindset.” He added that, “If you’re learning something, and you’re in the mindset of oh, I can’t do this. I’m just so bored, then like obviously you’re not really going to learn anything because you’re not motivated.” He attributed shifting his mindset to, “[teachers] motivating you or they’re not motivating you, and maybe they’re changing the way you’re perceiving the activities that you’re wanting to or assigned to learn.” When asked who he felt was responsible for the way he must learn, he concluded it was a mixture of the teachers and himself. He stated that he believed that he could shift his mindset sometimes, but that he could not other times. When Spartan is engaged in his learning, he is focused, loses track of time, and is excited to share what he has created. For example, Spartan entered a drawing to paint a city utility box located across the street from Creekside High School. He was excited about this possibility and with the support of the therapeutic classroom staff and his father, he was given the guidelines, time, and space to draw a scene and enter the competition. During this time, he was focused on his art, and little could distract him. He had a choice about what to draw and created his art for a purpose. When Spartan finished his drawing, he was excited to have the researcher place it on the board for the class to see.
Like Spartan, Morgan attributed attaining the right mindset to having options and stated, “When students have more options or can use their preferences for learning then they’re in the right mindset and can learn.” This held true for Morgan when given the choice about what he wanted to learn. He chose cryptocurrency and music and since has attended school more regularly and been engaged in and excited about his learning. He spoke with his peers and classroom staff about what he is learned, and played one of his tracks over the classroom speaker for everyone to hear. His peers were excited to ask him about music generally, what programs he used, how long it took, and broadly how he created the beats. Morgan felt self-motivated and connected this motivation to his understanding of the why of learning. He explained that meaningful learning “Has meaning toward your future, it will feel like you’re putting in work for a reason - like you have a reason to do [the learning], and [the learning] seems like a good tool to have.” As evidenced through his learning during the PAR group, this holds true for Morgan and
his peers. When they felt their learning had meaning toward their future, they were more engaged and excited to learn.

**Short and Impactful Learning**

Students collectively demonstrated a preference for learning that was not information dense or that did not take great efforts to pay attention. As Dwight and Charles worked on the matchbox car, they took frequent breaks, and they engaged with each other and their peers. Morgan created a one-minute audio clip that he shared with the researcher and class, and as he found success he is now engaging in a longer, more involved project in his music class. Spartan created two drawings, one that only took about thirty minutes and another that took him just a bit longer. These learning experiences were short and impactful. The students saw immediate results for their learning, and they were engaged in the process.

**Boredom and a Remedy**

Students explained that having academic stress causes them to lose interest in what they are learning and shut down or tune out. They feel that when there is too much to learn at once, they lose focus and get bored. They explain that they would rather have information in short chunks because it is easier for them to remain focused and engaged.

Michael, who is a funny, easygoing, 6’5”, twelfth grader says he is “usually struggling mentally, and bored,” but finds pleasure in reading, working out, mountain biking, and playing with his dogs. When questioned how he felt about school, Michael reported that, “I like that I get to see people, and I have nice teachers, but it’s boring and stressful.” When asked to explain more about how school is stressful, he stated, “That’s just the feeling I have when I’m focusing and trying to learn and do school.” Michael had often shared that he becomes bored and cannot concentrate when there is too much information. He also easily becomes overwhelmed and
cannot remember what he’s learned. In his own words, he “struggle[s] with learning and remembering.” One of the subjects Michael was responsible for learning in our classroom was government. He came up with the idea that he could learn the information by watching movies. However, he found it difficult to find movies that were short and concise enough to engage him, and that didn’t remind him of the boredom he had felt in other classrooms. He came up with the idea to watch brief, often trailer-length videos that explained principles of government more quickly, and from which he then shared what he had learned. When thinking of engaging videos he could watch, the researcher recommended Adam Ruins Everything videos, specifically the one explaining the electoral college. Michael reacted and said, “Oh, I hate that guy. No matter what you like, he tells you why you shouldn't like it,” but watched the video and admitted that “it was actually good.” Like with some of the other films he watched, what he learned and shared prompted a larger class discussion amongst his peers.

When asked during the interview how he feels about school, Michael said, “I learned a little bit, but I don't think it's as important as people say it is.” Michael reported enjoying reading books like Untethered Soul because “I think it's important because happiness is important in your mind, the way your mind works. I think it's so much more important than getting good grades in math.” The researcher could not disagree with this point but added that math helps develop our critical thinking and teaches us to solve problems, even if they are not related to math.

Similarly, Spartan claimed that “having to learn a lot of information at one time is overwhelming and stressful.” Spartan went on to explain that he enjoys platforms like Duolingo because “It doesn’t throw a ton of stuff [academic learning] all in your face.” He described Duolingo as a platform that releases new information slowly, one word at a time instead of a paragraph at once like in his French class, so he has time to learn and master one set of learning
before adding new information to his learning. Spartan explained that mastering information and slowly adding new information allows him to stay relaxed in his learning and not feel anxious and overwhelmed. Spartan communicated that he prefers learning in small chunks, and that when he is given too much information to learn at one time, he feels overwhelmed. He also qualifies for special education under Other Health Impairment (OHI) for Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), and so it makes sense that giving him information in smaller chunks works best for him. When he is given what he feels is large amounts of work at one time, he loses focus and daydreams. In connecting his passion for art with algebra, he was invited to draw a picture using $3x$, where $x$ is a variable of his choosing. He drew a person wearing three different hats. When it was explained that the hats needed to be the same because they are the same variable, he then drew the same hat on the person.

![Figure 6 Spartan’s 3x drawing. Used with Spartan’s permission](image-url)
This drawing took Spartan less than thirty minutes to complete, during which time he was completely engaged and focused. He was excited to show his drawing to the researcher and peers, and when the researcher asked him if they could use it as an example in their paper he replied, “Yeah, of course. That’d be cool!” His engagement and excitement are evidence that short and impactful learning works for him, which can be leveraged in his academic classes.

Dwight is often engaged with side technology, primarily his phone, as he is watching his online video lessons and answering questions. However, while he worked on the matchbox car, something he was interested in doing, he was on his phone playing a movie or video much less and he was more engaged in his academics. As a rapport leader, he thrived on engaging others in his project and sharing it with them. Through this, it has become evident that Dwight is a kinesthetic and social learner, and to engage him in learning access to these tools and bite-sized chunks of information can be the most supportive to him.

After the six-week PAR group, the PAR students were given a post academic survey, which was the same Likert-style survey they took at the start of the project. They rated higher on feeling interested in their academics, motivated to complete their academics because they enjoy learning the information, and feeling like they have choice and voice in what they are learning. The students who participated more in the PAR group had higher ratings than those who did not participate as much, but all their scores rose. For example, two students rated their interest in their academics at the highest possible rating, and the other two student’s scores both doubled. Interesting findings were that one student’s highest increase after the PAR group was his interest in his academics and feeling he had a voice in his academics, and while another student’s rating again doubled in feeling that he had a voice in his learning after participating in the PAR group.
Three students are continuing to work with the researcher to create curriculum that they find interesting and meaningful for the remainder of the school year in all areas but math. As the students communicated, they preferred to have math through the online platform because it was easier than developing curriculum and meeting benchmarks otherwise.

**Sharing with Administrators**

When the students had an opportunity to share their findings with the school principal, they explained that they enjoyed their learning and they had fun. There was playful banter between the principal and the students, and the researcher showed the lighting of the match box car video to the principal. When asked how he felt sharing his experience with the principal, Charles communicated that “It was cool,” but when asked if he felt empowered or a sense of being heard, he replied “Not really.” This was the consensus amongst the students and speaks to a gap between how students feel they are valued for learning. The following week, the assistant principal assigned to the students came by to see how the project developed, and the students were more engaged in their conversation with him. Again, the researcher showed him the same video she shared with the principal, and he heard about the video during an individual education plan (IEP) meeting two weeks before. There was more student engagement in the conversation with the assistant principal and the students appeared more relaxed and animated in speaking with him. This led the researcher to wonder if rapport between students and administration could lead to greater student confidence, empowerment, and agency at school.

**Instructional Self-Doubt and Insecurities**

During the project, the researcher sometimes worried students were off task more frequently when participating in their developed curriculum than when they had used the online learning platform as had been the practice before the research. The researcher also felt it was
more difficult to measure student progress and hold them accountable for their learning outcomes. The researcher realized that she did not have the students create shorter and more concrete benchmarks, which would give more guidance and accountability for their projects. The researcher checked in with them daily asking what they were going to work on for the day, but their responses were vague and unmeasurable. For example, Morgan would say, “I’m going to research Bitcoin,” and Dwight and Charles would say “Work on the car.” The researcher determined that having concrete learning outcomes each day was beneficial for both her and the students. The researcher altered this as the students progressed in their academics and the students were more accountable with their learning outcomes. The researcher worked with the students to explain what they were going to accomplish for the day, which kept them on track and more focused with their work. At the end of the day, she checked in with them and discussed what they completed and sometimes brainstormed ideas for the following day. This not only kept the students engaged and accountable, but it also abated the concern for the researcher that the students were progressing in their learning, providing a richer learning environment.

Learning to Let There Be Space and Time to Dream and Learn

The researcher also noticed that her students could daydream for extended periods of time, and she recognized through the research that in the current education model, educators expect students to be productive from the moment they enter the classroom to the moment they leave with little down time for six hours a day. The researcher noticed that she carries a certain level of anxiety that propels the need to be doing something that appears conventionally productive during the class periods and is imposing this productivity onto her students. Consequently, the researcher had concerns that her students were not learning enough or the necessary information to move to the next level of their academics, especially with her ninth
graders and especially in the subjects of math and science. Although the idea of daydreaming or
downtime in school was not addressed in the literature, it surfaced during the project and would
be an interesting area to explore in future research.

Conclusion

The findings from this research show that for meaningful and engaged learning to take
place, students need to feel a sense of community in their learning. As evidenced by Charles and
Dwight, when working together in building a matchbox car they were engaged, individually,
with each other, and other students as well.

The research also demonstrated that when students understand the why of their learning,
they are more engaged in their learning. Morgan was disengaged in his learning prior to
participating in the research group, but when he chose what he was going to learn, which he felt
was practical and useful to his future, he attended class more regularly and shared his learning
with his peers and classroom staff members. On more than one occasion, he became the teacher,
sharing his knowledge with the adults in the room.

The research also supported that when students feel bored and overwhelmed concerning
their learning, they cannot establish a positive mindset for learning. Instead, they need to
experience impactful learning that is short and engaging. Both times when Spartan had a purpose
for his drawing, he was focused, engaged, and created art that he was proud of and happy to
share with others. After he created his art, he engaged in conversation with his peers who also
enjoy drawing. One student who does not usually share her digital art with others, even showed
him her artwork. As was the case with Spartan, as Morgan researched and learned about
cryptocurrency, he shared with the adults and peers what he was learning, impacting the
knowledge of those around him. He was excited to share what he had learned, and he became the
facilitator of several class discussions about cryptocurrency and Bitcoin specifically. He also worked on his songs at school and continued at home because he was interested in what he was learning; then he returned to school to share it with the researcher who with his permission played it over the classroom speaker for everyone to hear. Again, this not only impacted him, but also those around him. Through the course of co-curriculum development, boredom around learning diminished to the point where students were excited to share their learning with others.

Two emerging themes in the research warrant further exploration. The first is the idea or intimation that daydreaming is in fact beneficial to learning. As the researcher observed students daydreaming and appearing at first glance to be off task, it later became evident that an inner and hidden curiosity was developing, and which translated into creative, productive, and often unexpected outcomes. As such, questions concerning productivity, deeper learning, and creativity surfaced. It would also be interesting to study what happens in the brain during daydreaming. Perhaps deeper learning could occur if students had time to daydream, or if they could make new connections to learning that they currently do not make.

Second, and following from the first mini revelation, it also occurred to the researcher that she did not need to have all the answers regarding student curriculum and learning. While this is aligned with Freire’s (1970) theoretical stance, this was the first time where it also became evident in practice for this longtime educator. The researcher felt the students had at first looked to her for the answers to what and how they should learn, and it was uncomfortable for both parties to inch away from the dynamic. Some students in the PAR group operated with more confidence than others when given the opportunity to design their curriculum and not rely on the researcher. However, other students were stopped in this process and did not move forward without explicit guidance from the researcher. The researcher found it both stifling and liberating
to feel that she did not need to provide the answers, and often reverted to the predominant
teacher-student model of telling students what they need to do and learn. As she explored Horton
(1990) and Rancère (1987) during this research, she started to understand the importance and
value of admitting she did not have all the answers. During the research, she found that when she
operated with this understanding, some students engaged more in their learning. This finding was
subtle, yet so powerful that she plans to continue learning about and implementing this method
of operating in her classroom.

The approach of allowing students to connect their interests to learning allowed them to
find enthusiasm for learning and gave them agency to answer the *why* of their learning which
provided the link for them to engage more deeply into learning. Removing the boredom around
learning provided the space for students to move forward with a mindset suitable for learning.
These strategies answer the driving question of the research: How do educators working with
high school special education students with emotional disturbance support them in cultivating
academic engagement and agency, and to co-create curriculum to support their intrinsic
motivation for learning? By connecting students’ interests to their learning, allowing them choice
in working with others, facilitating short and impactful learning, and co-creating curriculum,
they are more engaged in their learning and find it meaningful.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Through this study it became evident that key factors for academic engagement and intrinsic motivation with special education students who qualify under ED were community, the why or purpose of learning, and short and impactful learning. With these components, the students were more engaged in their learning, and they described their learning as fun.

Outlined in the following discussion are how the findings of eliciting students’ intrinsic academic motivation connects to the established literature and supports the literature in that students need to feel competent in what they are learning, and they need to possess a sense of autonomy in their learning. This discussion also reveals how the findings differ from the established literature in that eliciting intrinsic academic motivating in special education students who qualify under ED, they need to feel a sense of community, understand the why of their learning, and engage in short and impactful learning. The discussion dives into the implications for the literature and specifically for practice and policy. Lastly, it explores the limitations of the study and establishes grounds for future research.

The findings in this research revealed that to inspire academic motivation in special education students who qualify under ED, it is important for them to engage in short and impactful learning and have autonomy or choice in their learning. When students are governing their learning, they often choose curriculum suited to their interests and learning needs. This aligns with the literature in that, according to Frazier (2015), students need to feel competent in what they are learning, and if the curriculum is too easy or too difficult, they will not learn. During this study, when students generated their own learning, they chose curriculum best suited to their educational competence and gravitated to short and impactful learning. Although the participatory action research group was a six-week project, the students only worked on one or
two learning outcomes during that time. This allowed them to stay focused on the project day-to-day, which presented as short and impactful because it was manageable to them. They were not juggling six or seven classes as many of their peers must do in the general education setting.

Likewise, Ryan et al. (2021) states that to feel a sense of governing their learning and for their interests in the learning to continue, students need autonomy in their learning. This also corresponded to the study that when students chose what they wanted to learn, they were interested in their learning through the duration of their project, and some students continued with student-driven learning after the project ended.

The primary lack of research is how special education students who qualify under ED maintain their academic intrinsic motivation. Sullivan and Sadeh (2016) investigated the dropout rate specifically for students with ED and found there is a lack of empirical research on the effectiveness of interventions in determining what works to keep ED students in school. Through rating scales, Carter et al. (2006) found that students who qualify under ED had a restricted ability to engage in self-determination behavior, but it is unclear if the restricted ability was derived from the students or was a lack of opportunity provided from the adults. The study also did not explore academic motivation as it relates to SDT specifically, but it seems plausible that if these students are academically intrinsically motivated and enjoy learning, then they would naturally be driven to learn, which was the driving question behind this study.

Frazier (2015) explains students need to feel connected to their teachers in that they feel authentically valued and respected by their teachers, and it is through this relatedness that they can utilize integrated or identified regulation and thrive academically. However, the study showed that students gravitated toward community with their peers and worked with their peers,
which inspired their intrinsic motivation. With the three students who participated fully in the PAR group for the duration of the six weeks, they all chose to work with peers on their projects.

Another area where the study deviated from the literature was in the importance of the why or purpose for learning. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) explain the importance of autonomy in academic intrinsic motivation but going further is students linking their learning to needs of their future. Morgan was a good example of this when he wanted to learn about cryptocurrency because he feels it is important to know about it for managing his future finances. He connected learning about cryptocurrency with information he needs for his future.

Finally, the study showed that short and impactful learning was important for students to remain engaged in their learning, and if they felt that they were given too much information at once they found the curriculum boring, difficult, and lost their motivation for learning. This was not discussed in the literature as something necessary or important for intrinsic motivation, and an area that could be examined in greater detail.

Implications for the Literature

It has been acknowledged that there is currently not enough research established concerning how special education students who qualify with ED learn or what keeps them motivated to learn. This research shed some light on this specific topic, and three themes materialized. While research has already established that for intrinsic motivation of student learning there must be a sense of belonging or that others care about them, which is referred to as relatedness (Niemiec & Ryan, 2021), and that students must feel that their teachers authentically respect and value them (Frazier, 2015). However, a new insight is that special education students with ED work best in community, and when given the opportunity to develop their own curriculum, they chose to work with their peers.
Likewise, Niemiec and Ryan (2021) postulate that students require a sense of competence in their learning, or they will not find academic success, while this study found that short and impactful learning keeps special education students with ED motivated in their learning. During their interviews, students communicated that when given too much information at one time or when projects or learning felt endless, they became bored and disengaged with the curriculum; however, when they had the opportunity to create curriculum that was concise and included relevance, their learning was engaging and meaningful to them.

Finally, the study uncovered that the students needed to understand the why or purpose of their learning and how it connected to their future needs. They explained that when they do not understand why they are learning information in school, the learning is disengaging, and they lose interest in the learning. Although literature proves that students necessitate autonomy in their learning to continue to be motivated (Ryan et al., 2021), the question of future relatedness comes to light through this study as a critical component of motivation for special education students with ED.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

Through the findings of this research, there are implications for practice and policy on maintaining academic intrinsic motivation in students as a whole, but specifically special education students who qualify under ED. Change is never easy, but if educators examine their methodology and curriculum, this could elicit change in their schools, and hopefully incite reform in education law. Based on history, educators cannot wait for education law to drive the change they want to see in their classrooms, and it must start with them at the classroom level.
Classrooms

As this study was conducted in a special education therapeutic classroom with students on modified curriculum, the teacher can continue to explore student-driven and problem-posing learning in her classroom. She can explore how this learning can be used with students who are not on modified curriculum and how the learning can be implemented to adhere to the California state standards. She can investigate how to make student-driven learning the way of learning in her classroom. Math was the most complex subject to incorporate into student-driven learning, so experimenting with ways to align math to student-driven learning is necessary. Many students ask when they will use algebra later in life, so connecting learning, especially in math, to practical life situations could make learning math more meaningful to students.

In the classroom it is essential to give students voice and agency in what they are learning for their learning to be meaningful. To do this, teachers need to trust their students. They need to trust that their students can be co-creators of curriculum, that their students are not empty vessels that need filling, and that their students can lead and guide their learning. Teachers need to make connections with their students by getting to know them, listening to them, and learning their interests. By honoring and acting on what students want to learn, they will have the liberty to explore learning in a way that is meaningful to them. Allowing students liberties in their learning will permit students to learn in ways that are best for them. It is also essential to create community in the classroom and allow students to work together if they choose to. Some students will prefer to work alone while others choose to work together or in a group.

Parents and administrators need to understand the benefits of student-driven learning and support teachers who are exploring this type of learning. For teachers to move toward student-driven learning, they need to feel supported by parents and administrators. Teachers can
collaborate with parents to support students in making learning that combines home and school, possibly making the learning more relevant. Administrators can support teachers in their classrooms by being open and curious about student-driven learning.

**Schools**

With openness and curiosity, schools can allow more freedom to teachers in how they educate students, and administrators can visit classrooms to see what student-driven learning looks like, sharing what they find with other administrators. School administrators can generate professional development opportunities where teachers can learn and explore bringing student-driven learning into their classrooms, and teachers participating in student-driven learning can share their learning and insight with other interested teachers. Schools can foster an atmosphere of student-driven learning encouraging teachers to review the data and supporting them in implementing it into their curriculum. Also, schools can become a place where students share their learning with their peers, teachers, administrators, parents, and their communities.

**Educational Policies**

The government relies on standardized testing to guarantee all students are acquiring the required knowledge and skills in schools. Although in theory this method seems appropriate, in practice it diminishes students’ intrinsic motivation for learning, especially in special education students who qualify under ED. State standards make it difficult for teachers to allow students to have agency in their curriculum as the learning is driven from the top down, squelching their intrinsic motivation for learning. Therefore, education laws need to be reformed allowing students agency in their learning while still validating that they are graduating with the necessary knowledge to be active and successful members of society.
Our current educational model asks students to fit into a box for thirteen or more years, and then often expects them to think outside the box when they join the workforce. As young as kindergarten, we medicate students who do not fit in the education box, who cannot sit still, who naturally think differently, to make them like their peers. We change the child instead of examining the education system. Laws need to be implemented that allow for more freedoms for students and teachers. New ways of educating need to be developed so that by the time students with ED are in high school, they are not so dejected they are ready to quit. Education law requiring students’ participation in curriculum development, even at the elementary level, should be mandatory for students to maintain their intrinsic motivation and love for learning. Teacher training programs need reform so that teachers do not feel bound by the education system’s set standards, but they feel liberated by learning and implementing participatory action research groups in their classrooms. Also, in teacher training programs, examining the educational models of people like Paulo Freire and Miles Horton as examples of intertwining education and social reform would be beneficial.

Finally, a complaint from the interviewees of this study was that schools do not teach life skills, but only prepare students for college. This is true in the community where the project was administered. In this community, the overall expectation is that all students will go to college, and there is little support for students not on this track. Education law needs to support students not on the college path with programs in high school, so they leave prepared to work in a trade.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

In examining the study, it is evident that there were several limitations of the research. The limitations include the number of students who participated in the study, that they were on modified curriculum, and the study only took place in one special education therapeutic
classroom. The demographics and lack of diversity was another limitation. Because of these limitations and that little to no research has been done on how special education students who qualify under ED are motivated to learn, there are many areas for future research explained in detail.

**Limitations of the Study**

One limitation was the limited number of students who participated in the research. Of the six students who started the participatory action research group, only three engaged in the learning through the duration of the six weeks. One student returned to the online program after the first exploration of curriculum alignment, another student stopped participating after two weeks, and a third student returned to the online platform after five weeks. A further limitation is that the students invited to the research were all on modified curriculum, which means their curriculum is not meeting the California state standards. Because of this, there were no students who were on unmodified curriculum participating in the research and data for those students was not available.

An additional limitation was conducting the research in one special education therapeutic classroom at one high school. In a school district with five special education therapeutic classrooms, integrating the study into the other four classrooms would expand the study’s scope. Students in another special education therapeutic classroom might have responded differently to the project, so having more time to collaborate with the other classroom teachers to extract data for broader triangulation of data would be valuable. Moreover, there were limitations of demographics as the study was conducted only at one school with participants of one ethnicity. The PAR group was not racially or culturally diverse, and for the study the students all spoke English exclusively and were all male students. Finally, there were limitations around best
practices for student-driven and problem-posing learning as it was a new concept for the teacher, and she was learning along with the students as the study was implemented. A final limitation was the time available to conduct the research. The researcher had six weeks to complete the study, which was not enough time to collaborate with the other therapeutic classrooms throughout the school district. The limited time also did not allow for gathering data from multiple implementations of student-driven and problem-posing learning. It would have been beneficial to have more time to gather data and apply findings from the initial attempt at the experiment.

**Future Research**

Because there is little research regarding the academic motivation of special education students who qualify under emotional disturbance, future research is crucial. A longitudinal study examining a variety of schools with more varied student populations would be useful in ascertaining the implication of the research on students with ED and their motivation for learning. Since the research looked at a small sample of students in one high school therapeutic classroom, it would be beneficial to expand the research to many therapeutic classrooms over a longer period with a larger sampling of students. The students were from the same geographic area, so expanding the research to a greater and more diverse sample of participants would be more conclusive. During the research the students identified as male, so it would be interesting to know the effects on students of various gender affiliation. Moreover, the research took place in the spring semester of school, after students were accustomed to six months of using an online platform for learning, so it would be interesting to see if starting the school year with student-driven learning would procure different results. Looking at starting student-driven learning at the middle school or elementary level could provide insight as students at the high school level are
used to learning happening in a top-down model, so it could be more challenging for students to think differently about learning the longer they are steeped in our current educational model. Also, examining the grade associated with the outcome would provide relevant data to determine if ninth grade students are more likely to want the teacher to tell them what to do as their independence is still developing, or will twelfth graders expect teachers to create their curriculum since that has been their experience during their schooling?

Through the research, it was evident that some students flourished by creating and implementing their curriculum, while others chose to return to the online program for learning. Additional research could determine the differences of these outcomes, exploring why some students chose student-driven learning and others chose an online program for learning, and the value that choice plays in engaging them with either format. Also, there is a need to explore the role of teacher guidance for student facilitation of curriculum and learning outcomes and determining best practices in this role, specifically assessing benchmarks and accountability for learning. Lastly, investigating feelings of empowerment and sense of being heard for students with ED would provide insight on what they need to engage these feelings. Perhaps exploring these feelings could provide teachers more insight on how best to support students with ED in accessing their learning.

**Conclusion**

The research regarding maintaining students’ intrinsic academic motivation is prevalent, and the research outlines that autonomy, relatedness, and competence are key components of student motivation. The gap in literature brought forward the question as to how special education students who qualify under emotional disturbance maintain their intrinsic academic motivation, and this study sought to shed light specifically in that area, especially when given the
option to participate in co-designing their curriculum, which they had not participated in prior to the study. There was also a gap in understanding the role of community and short impactful learning that emerged during the study. Through the study, community, the why of learning, and short and impactful learning were exposed as important components of learning. It would be advantageous to explore more research and examination of these elements in determining the impact they have on students’ learning. Exploring a link between daydreaming and academics would be interesting for further research. It would be beneficial to know the impact of daydreaming on the brain, and what happened in the brain during daydreaming. Furthermore, continuing to consider the idea of teachers not having the answers and shifting classrooms to a dialogue-based setting would be compelling for further study.
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https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v11n9p64


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Appendix A: Pre- and Post-PAR Survey Questions
1. I’m interested in my academics.

2. I feel motivated to complete my academics.

3. I feel motivated to complete my academics because I enjoy learning the information.

4. I feel motivated to complete my academics because I feel like I have to.

5. I enjoy attending school.

6. I feel like the lessons/academic content taught in my classes are pertinent to my life.

7. I feel like the way I'm taught at school is empowering.

8. I feel like I have a choice in my academics and what I'm learning.

9. I feel like I have a voice in my learning at school.

10. I feel like if I had input to my lessons/academic content taught in my classes then I'd learn more.

11. Is there anything you'd like to share or think would be helpful for me to consider?
Appendix B: Interview Questions
1. How do you feel about school?
2. What do you like and dislike about it?
3. Who do you think is responsible for the way you have to learn?
4. How do you feel about learning? Are there other things outside of school that you do like learning about? What is it about those things that makes them fun and interesting?
5. How could those qualities be brought into school if we could totally imagine school differently?
6. What aspects of your academic learning do you enjoy?
7. Are there platforms of learning that you find engaging and that work well for you?
8. What does meaningful and engaged learning look like to you?
9. What are your primary interests inside and/or outside of school?
10. If you could use your primary interests for learning in school, what would it look like?
11. Using your primary interests, how would you create academics that are fun and engaging?
12. What information do you think is important to know upon graduation from high school?
13. Who do you think could help you change the way learning happens for you?
14. What do you think some of the challenges or obstacles for that change might be?
15. If you develop a way of learning that is meaningful to you, who needs to know about it?