

Self-determination and Student Engagement Among Three Black High School Males

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Extant research shows that self-determination skill promotion increases secondary students with disabilities' capacity to engage in general education classrooms. However, little research has investigated how self-determination skills interact with indicators of student engagement among non-disabled underachieving adolescents. Furthermore, even though the ninth grade is a critical transition year, no studies in this area of research have specifically focused on Black ninth grade males' educational experiences. The purpose of this study was to understand how self-determination skills interacted with three non-disabled, underachieving, ninth grade Black males' engagement in school. The participants were a part of a larger study, in which the first author recruited ten ninth grade males from a public laboratory school to understand their perceptions of classroom autonomy support. We employed qualitative case study methodology and used a deductive process to analyze the data. We found three self-determination skills as interacting with the participants' engagement in school: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-regulation, and (c) expressing preferences. This study shows that although understudied, Black male students' self-directed use of multiple self-determination skills may cultivate their engagement in school. We conclude this paper with a discussion of implications for practice, limitations, and future research directions.

Key words: student engagement, self-determination, Black males, multiple case study design

Expanding how educators enhance Black high school males' academic achievement is long overdue, considering that Black adolescent males continue to underperform academically compared to their White and female counterparts (McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016). A number of factors influence academic achievement among Black males, such as access to high-quality early childhood educational programs (Johns, 2016; Wright & Ford, 2016), teachers' instructional and emotional support (Caton, 2012; Tucker et al., 2002), experience with school discrimination (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008), and special education eligibility and related services (Booth, Butler, Richardson, Washington, & Henfield, 2016).

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Student engagement is another significant predictor of Black males' academic achievement (Connell, Halpem-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997; Wang & Peck, 2013). As research shows that Black males also are less likely to be engaged in school compared to their peers (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010), fostering their engagement may very well improve their academic achievement.

Both environmental and personal factors contribute to students' engagement in school (Chavous et al., 2008; Connell et al., 1995; Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009; Tucker et al., 2002). Environmental factors include peer, family, school, and teacher related variables; and personal factors include students' demographic characteristics and multiple psychological variables (i.e., personal agency, and social-emotional and behavioral functioning) (Carter, McGee, Taylor, & Williams, 2007; Conner & Pope, 2013; Li & Lerner, 2011; Reeve, 2013). Many studies have examined the interaction between student engagement, environmental factors, students' demographic characteristics, and markers of students' social-emotional and behavioral functioning. However, few studies have critically examined how various aspects of students' personal agency (e.g., self-regulation, self-awareness, expressing preferences) simultaneously interact with indicators of student engagement. Personal agency refers to an individual's capacity to initiate and direct actions for a given purpose and out of one's own volition (Wehmeyer, 2004; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). The link between students' personal agency and their engagement in school warrants additional inquiry, as Noguera (2003) stressed the importance of Black male students exerting agency over their education (alongside changing environmental factors) to contribute to their academic achievement. In this regard, understanding Black males' engagement in school from a theoretical perspective centered on students' personal agency can be informative and guide school-based support services.

As part of a larger study examining underachieving ninth grade males' experiences with teachers' implementation of autonomy supportive instructional practices, the investigators in this study examined the interaction between indicators of student engagement and key self-determination skills among three of the students. For the present study, we utilized qualitative case study methodology because we sought to understand how self-determination skills interact with indicators of student engagement among a specific group of students, without controlling or manipulating their surrounding environment (Yin, 2014). We specifically used a multiple case study design because Yin (2014) emphasized that researchers can better understand the phenomenon of interest through several cases versus a single case. Therefore, we sought to answer the following broad research question: "How do exemplars of self-determination skills interact with indicators of student engagement among non-disabled, underachieving, ninth grade Black males?"

Theoretical Framework

The current study utilized Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris' (2004) definition of student engagement and Causal Agency Theory (CAT; Wehmeyer, 2004) as the guiding conceptual frameworks. Student engagement describes the magnitude of students' active involvement in the academic and social aspects of school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). It is a multi-dimensional construct that includes behavioral, affective, and cognitive components. Fredricks et al. (2004) defined *behavioral engagement* as students' active participation in class (e.g., work completion and being on task) and the broader school environment (e.g., involvement in an

extracurricular activity on campus), as well as their display of appropriate behavior. *Affective engagement* refers to the feelings and emotions students hold about class and school (e.g., happy versus bored) and students' perceptions of adults and peers in the school as caring and supportive. Finally, Fredricks and colleagues defined *cognitive engagement* as students' investment in their learning, such as having elevated levels of academic motivation and using self-regulated learning strategies to deepen their understanding of course content.

Educators apply CAT in educational settings with the objective of promoting behaviors and attitudes that enable school-age youth to contribute to their academic outcomes (Wehmeyer, 2004). CAT is based on the premise that students can exert more agency over their education, leading to increased achievement, by developing and utilizing interrelated skills referred to as self-determination skills (Shogren et al., 2015; Wehmeyer, 1997). These skills include: (a) choice/decision making, (b) problem solving, (c) expressing preferences, (d) self-advocacy, (e) self-awareness/self-knowledge (f) self-regulation, (g) self-efficacy, and (h) setting and attaining goals (Shogren, Wehmeyer, & Lane, 2016). *Choice/decision-making* entails intentionally selecting to engage in a specific course of action. Similarly, *problem solving* involves selecting the best course of action to carry out in response to a situation that does not have an immediately perceived solution (Wehmeyer, 1997). *Expressing preferences* and *self-advocacy* are similar in nature, as expressing preferences entails communicating one's needs, likes, and dislikes (Tseng & Reeve, 2011) and *self-advocacy* entails assertively stating one's wants, needs, and rights to obtain needed supports (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005). *Self-awareness/knowledge* refers to an individual's knowledge of his or her goals, strengths, weaknesses, needs, interests, likes, and preferences (Field & Hoffman, 1994; Wehmeyer, 1997). *Self-regulation* involves the proactive and intentional use of various strategies to maximize one's performance (Wehmeyer, 1997). *Self-efficacy* is based on one's belief that he or she can achieve a desired outcome (Wehmeyer, 1997). Finally, as the name implies, *goal setting and attaining* involves an individual planning, setting, and achieving self-selected goals (Wehmeyer, 1997).

Studies have shown that students who developed and used a variety of self-determination skills (e.g., goal setting, self-regulation, self-advocacy, problem-solving) were actively involved in their education (e.g., participating in educational planning) and experienced higher levels of academic achievement (Fowler, Konrad, Walker, Test, & Wood, 2007; Washington, Hughes, & Cosgriff, 2012). Nevertheless, because school-based research and applications of CAT have mostly focused on students with disabilities, little is known about how general education students' use of multiple self-determination skills interact with their achievement and engagement in school. Understanding how self-determination skills interact with indicators of student engagement among general education students can be useful for ultimately promoting their academic achievement. Research shows that student engagement significantly predicts student achievement and student achievement significantly predicts student engagement (Conner & Pope, 2013; Lam et al., 2012). Scholars also have demonstrated that student engagement serves as a mediator between environmental factors (i.e., teachers' classroom support) and academic achievement (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Lam et al., 2012). Thus, if students' application of self-determination skills influences their engagement in school, promoting Black males' development and use of these skills through school-based support may also increase their achievement overtime.

Furthermore, in studies that included non-disabled male and female students from diverse backgrounds, adolescent students with higher levels of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement were more likely to experience academic achievement and less likely to drop out of

school (Conner & Pope, 2013; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Wang & Peck, 2013). For example, Wang and Peck (2013) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the relations between student engagement and various academic outcomes. The researchers collected survey and interview data from the student participants during ninth grade, eleventh grade, and one year after graduation. Most of the students were Black (57%) and 53% of the students identified as female. Wang and Peck (2013) found that only 17% of ninth grade students reported elevated levels of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional (affective) engagement. This finding is troubling, considering that students who did report higher levels of all three aspects of student engagement were more likely to have higher grade point averages and lower dropout rates. Although Wang and Peck (2013) did not find a significant difference in engagement levels based on students' demographic backgrounds (e.g., gender and race/ethnicity), other researchers have found that males in general (Lam et al., 2012), and Black males in particular (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010), are more likely to report limited engagement in school compared to their female peers.

It is especially important to understand how self-determination skills interact with indicators of student engagement for ninth grade students. Transitioning to the ninth grade can be challenging for many youth (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008) and student engagement tends to decrease from elementary to high school (Marks, 2000). Indeed, Wang and Peck found that only 17% of ninth grade students reported elevated levels of all three dimensions of student engagement; and researchers have identified ninth grade as a critical year in which students who fail at least one academic course are at a substantial risk of dropping out of school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Neild et al., 2008). Unlike one's age, gender, and race/ethnicity, student engagement is a malleable factor that could improve by attending to contextual (i.e., peers, family, teachers, and school) and within student variables (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Self-determination skills are a set of within student variables that educators could target, as researchers have found a connection between many of the self-determination skills and general education students' engagement in school. For example, previous research showed that students were more likely to report higher levels of at least one aspect of engagement when they were provided more opportunities to make choices/decisions in class (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004); reported high levels of self-efficacy (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003); and reported having a variety of school-related goals (Caraway et al., 2003). Self-regulation has been linked to student engagement by way of self-regulated learning and cognitive engagement. Scholars conceptualize self-regulated learning as a significant aspect of cognitive engagement that entails students using a variety of strategies (e.g., studying, seeking academic help, etc.) to enhance their learning and understanding of course content (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wolters & Taylor, 2012; Zimmerman, 2002). The authors are unaware of any studies that have linked problem-solving, self-awareness, and self-advocacy to student engagement. However, research showing an association between these skills and student achievement (e.g., Washington et al., 2012) suggests a possible link to student engagement, given the strong relationship between academic achievement and engagement in school. Still, due to the scarce research, it is premature to assume that an association exists between all self-determination skills and various indicators of student engagement.

Of the studies that have researched the relation between student engagement and self-determination skills, most only focused on one or a few of the skills in isolation. Janosz (2012) indicated that studying the various contributors to student engagement separately is a limitation, as it does not take a person-centered approach by understanding how various constructs operate together for individuals. Furthermore, most studies investigating students' use of multiple self-

determination skills have only included students with disabilities. Finally, as most studies of student engagement utilize quantitative analyses, Fredricks et al. (2004) indicated that qualitative studies could deepen our understanding of engagement related phenomena by gaining students' perceptions about their lived experiences.

Exclusively investigating the experiences of Black adolescent males may also reveal how established structural variables related to racist and unjust practices manifest within the interaction between their use of self-determination skills and indicators of their engagement. One presumed benefit of self-determination skill use among Black males is that it empowers them to assume control over their educational outcomes (i.e., achievement and engagement), which may protect Black males against racial biases and discriminate treatment that contributes to their disengagement in school. When schools punish and suspend Black males at disproportionate rates, they lose valuable instructional time, fall further behind academically, become disconnected from school, and in some cases drop out altogether (e.g., Caton, 2012). For example, Black adolescent males who participated in prior studies indicated that harsh, unfair discipline pushed them away and influenced their decision to withdraw from school (Allen, 2017; Caton, 2012). Furthermore, classroom instruction that is relevant and connected to students' experiences, interests, likes, and preferences influence students' engagement in school (Reeve et al., 2004; Milner, 2013; Wiggan, 2008). However, teachers may be less inclined to get to know Black male students (Allen, 2017; Caton, 2012) and miss critical opportunities to inform their delivery of engaging—and even culturally responsive—classroom instruction for this group of students.

Allen (2017) found that to some degree, Black high school males desired to succeed and internalized a sense of personal responsibility for their academic achievement, despite experiencing racism and unequal treatment in school. To this end, Black male students who learn how to regulate their learning, make productive choices/decisions, express their preferences, and use other self-determination skills may develop the capacity to overcome unjust disciplinary practices and disengaging pedagogy. On the other hand, equipping them with these skills alone may be insufficient due to the significant association between student engagement, classroom instruction, and student-teacher relationships (Lam et al., 2012; Reeve, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Although Black males may employ various self-determination skills in the classroom, teachers may continue to utilize ineffective instructional techniques that are difficult for Black male students to overlook. Black male students also may lack positive student-teacher relationships that welcome their active contributions in class (Allen 2017; Caton, 2012). In the same vein, teachers may interpret Black male students' attempts to express their likes, preferences, interests, and dislikes as rude and disrespectful, which can cause these students to further withdraw to avoid experiencing punitive and undue sanctions (Allen, 2017; Ferguson, 2000; Howard, 2008). Researchers have demonstrated that occurrences in the school and home facilitate or thwart students' development and use of self-determination skills (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006). Hence, scholars also must critically examine structural barriers that may prevent Black male students from benefiting from or using multiple self-determination skills in class and the larger the school environment.

Method

Setting

The first author and principal investigator recruited all participants during the 2013-2014 school year from Warrior High School (we used pseudonyms for the school and participants). We selected Warrior High School through a convenience and purposive sampling process. Warrior High School had an established partnership with a local university, and the researchers engaged in a pre-screening process as part of the larger study. Specifically, the first author conducted individual interviews with ninth grade core academic teachers to ensure that teachers were incorporating autonomy supportive instructional practices in their classrooms. Warrior High School is a part of a public laboratory school located in the Southeastern United States. As a public laboratory school, the state's department of education funds the school. The school also is affiliated with the local university, where university researchers and the school's faculty and staff collaborate to investigate and develop evidence-based school practices.

We collected information about the student body population from the school's website at the time of the larger study. The school served 1,150 students in grades K-12. Forty-eight percent of the students in the school were White, 23% were Black/African-American, 18% were Hispanic or Latino, 4% were Asian, 1% was Native American, and 6% were multiracial. Twenty-two percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and 8% of students had a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. The website did not include detailed information about the categories of disabilities represented across the student body. Warrior High School's diverse student population reflects the demographic characteristics of the state's overall student population. Parents in the surrounding community must submit an enrollment application, and students are selected to attend the school through a lottery system.

Administrators decided to enroll all students in honors or advanced core academic classes due to the school's commitment to expose all students to a rigorous curriculum, irrespective of their demographic and educational background. Underachieving students received additional support through a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. MTSS is a service delivery framework applied in school settings to provide students interventions of increasing intensity based on their needs (Walker & Shinn, 2010). The representative three-tiered model includes the provision of universal support/high quality instruction for all students (tier 1), supplementary/short-term support for a small group of students with mild needs (tier 2), and intensive/long-term support (e.g., individualized interventions) for an even smaller group of students with intense needs (tier 3). At the time of the study, supplementary and intensive support for ninth grade students consisted of teacher-led small group lessons during class and after-school help sessions to review course content.

Participants

The first author submitted one Institutional Review Board (IRB) application covering the larger and present study. After receiving approval from the IRB, the first author collaborated with school administrators to identify underachieving ninth grade male students and invite them to participate. Ten underachieving ninth grade males were recruited for the larger study because the purpose of that study was to examine each of their perceptions, irrespective of their race/ethnicity and disability status. We only obtained signed parental consent and student assent for six students,

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including the three students who met criteria for the current study. For the current study, we selected three participants using purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009). Although we invited any underachieving ninth grade male to participate in the larger study, we were only interested in examining the experiences of the Black males who did not have a disability for the current study. Only three out of the six students who participated in the larger study met the criteria for the current study. Rather than interviewing the three participants at a separate time, we extracted data related to our research question from the larger study. For purposes of the present and larger study we defined “underachieving” as students who received at least one “F” or “D” grade in a core academic course (e.g., English, math, or science) at the end of the first semester of ninth grade. We established this criterion after examining longitudinal studies indicating that first-time ninth grade students who fail at least one academic core course at the end of the first semester are at a greater risk of not finishing school. Table 1 includes a description of the three Black males included in the present study.

Table 1.

Participants’ pseudonym, age, and fall core academic grades

Participant	Age	English Honors	Algebra	Biology Honors
Allen	14	C	D	D
Dakota	14	B	B	D
Wade	14	B	C	D

Data Collection

The same method of data collection occurred for the larger and current study. This section will describe the general data collection procedures and identify specific data that were of foci for the current study given that we extracted data from the larger study to answer the research question. The first author collected all data during the second semester of the 2013-2014 academic school year. Consistent with case study research, we used multiple sources of data to answer the research question, including interviews and direct observations (Yin, 2014).

Interviews. The first author conducted a minimum of four one-to-one semi-structured interviews with each student participant on the school’s campus before, during, or after school. Each interview took approximately 25 to 30 minutes. The purpose of the first and second interviews was to get to know the students (e.g., learn about their goals and interests) and understand their general impressions of their teachers’ classroom instruction, respectively. The first author also conducted two to four follow-up interviews with each student within two weeks of each classroom observation (see the next section for a description of the observations). During the follow-up interviews, the researcher prompted the students to share their thoughts about and reactions to observed instructional practices and explain why they displayed specific behaviors (e.g., not participating in class discussions). The students also disclosed their reactions to class assignments teachers required them to complete during the observation period. The first author audiotaped all interviews and transcribed them verbatim. For the current study, we only utilized interview data from the three non-disabled Black male students’ transcripts.

According to Yin (2014), case study researchers may or may not ask research participants direct questions about the phenomenon under study. Instead, data relevant to the research question may naturally emerge through unstructured conversation/inquiry. The interviewer (i.e., first

author) did not explicitly ask the participants to describe how their use of multiple self-determination skills interacted with their engagement in school. Instead, the interviewer asked each student to discuss their interests, likes, dislikes, and goals; describe and elaborate upon their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in response to their teachers' instructional practices; and discuss factors that influenced their decision to share or not share their preferences with teachers. These questions occurred within the context of the larger study and yielded descriptive examples of indicators of affective, cognitive, and behavioral engagement and self-determination skills. Examples of self-determination skills specifically emerged when the participants described (a) their interests, likes, dislikes, and goals, (b) how their interests, likes, dislikes, and goals influenced their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in class, (c) how they kept themselves from "giving up" (disengagement), and (d) how they believed they would likely respond (e.g., increased engagement) if teachers understood their wants, needs, and preferences more. Taken together, we sought to understand how these processes interacted.

Observation. Interviews were the primary method of data collection. However, the first author also conducted classroom observations in the students' core academic classes (most of the observations occurred in the students' English and biology courses) to get a better understanding of the participants' classroom experiences and explore their reactions to teachers' instructional practices. The first author completed an average of five 50-minute observations for each student. For the current study, we only utilized the notes taken when the researcher observed the three non-disabled Black male students. Specifically, we highlighted examples of the students' behavioral reactions to their teachers' instructional practices, given that their reactions were an indication of their behavioral engagement (or lack thereof).

Data Analysis

Due to our research question and decision to analyze the data from a person-centered perspective (Janosz, 2012) our "unit of analysis" (Yin, 2014, p. 31) was at the individual level. We focused on the unique experiences of each research participant during the early stage of data analysis, followed by a cross-case analysis of their collective experiences. After compiling all observation and interview data for each participant, we specified the data we would analyze based on literature, established theories, and other empirical studies (Yin, 2014). We determined that we would only focus on indicators of self-determination skills and student engagement as defined in the research literature (Field & Hoffman, 1994; Fredricks et al., 2004; Tseng & Reeve, 2011; Wehmeyer, 1997). As a result, we created a priori categories developed from the literature on self-determination skills and student engagement. Table 2 includes a description of a priori categories and coded examples from the data. After creating and defining these categories, we then coded relevant sentences and phrases from the interview transcripts and classroom observation notes. The first author coded the transcripts and observation data first and the second author completed a second review of the data. When disagreements emerged about how to code and categorize specific data, we each presented our rationale until we agreed on a final code. For student engagement, we coded and categorized any indicators of affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement relevant to the participants' academic and learning experiences. Regarding self-determination skills, we coded and categorized self-directed actions relevant to the participants' learning, which initially resulted in the identification of two self-determination skills: self-regulation and expression of needs. After a second review of the data, we identified two additional self-determination skills:

self-awareness and choice/decision making. Because we were interested in explaining the interaction between indicators of student engagement and all key self-determination skills, we also were looking for examples of students' demonstrating problem-solving skills, self-advocacy and self-efficacy. However, we did not find exemplars of these three self-determination skills during data analysis.

We then followed a deductive and iterative process for explanatory case studies to conduct a cross-case analysis of their collective experiences (Yin, 2014). The deductive nature of qualitative inquiry entails beginning with a specific theory/hypothesis and testing the data against the theory. The iterative process entails returning to the hypothesis during the analysis phase, exploring rival hypotheses, and refining the hypothesis. First, we developed an initial explanatory proposition which stipulated a presumed set of casual links regarding how self-determination skills related to the participants' engagement. We hypothesized that the participants' use of various self-determination skills would contribute to their behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement. Second, we compared the findings of this initial explanatory proposition to each participants' experiences. We did not make any revisions to the proposition after comparing the findings of the initial explanatory proposition to Allen's experiences. Next, we compared the proposition to Dakota's experiences. Revisions to the proposition were made given that Dakota's experiences were slightly different. For example, we noted that self-regulation strategies contributed to all three aspects of engagement, whereas expressing preferences was tied closely to affective and behavioral engagement only. We compared the other details of Dakota's case and Allen's experiences against the revision, which resulted in an acceptable fit. Finally, we compared the revision to the findings to Wade's case, which too resulted in an acceptable fit.

Trustworthiness

We did not complete member checking because we utilized secondary data analysis for the current study. However, we did implement several other "case study tactics" (p. 45) as recommended by Yin (2014) to establish the quality and trustworthiness of the research study. First, we collected multiple sources of evidence. We also maintained a chain of evidence by documenting the major findings from the study, noting the source(s) of evidence to support the findings, and placing the appropriate evidence into a matrix of categories. As described in the previous section, we also followed a systematic process of analyzing the data. During this process, the first author was the primary "explanation builder" (p.150). The second author served as the external colleague who compared the explanatory proposition against the three cases and provided alternative explanations for the presumable links. When the second author noted alternative explanations, the first author re-read each case study, checked the details of the case study against the alternative explanation, and revised the proposition accordingly. According to Yin (2014), each of these efforts can strengthen the analytical conclusions that the case study researcher elects to make.

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Table 2.
Description of A Priori Codes

Coding Categories	Definition of Category	Examples of Codes
Student Engagement		
<i>Affective Engagement</i>	Feelings and emotions the students held about class and assignments (e.g., happy versus bored)	-Participants describing their class assignments as boring or fun
<i>Behavioral Engagement</i>	Students' (in)active participation in class	-Participants describing themselves as completing assignments or being off-task -Participants observed participating or not participating in class
<i>Cognitive Engagement</i>	Students using self-regulated learning strategies to understand course content	-Participants connecting coursework to background knowledge and long-term goals -Participants studying course material
Self-Determination Skills		
<i>Self-Awareness</i>	Students' knowledge of their goals, strengths, weaknesses, needs, interests, likes, and preferences	-Participants' descriptions of their goals, likes, interests, and preferences
<i>Self-Regulation</i>	Students' proactive and intentional use of various strategies to improve their outcomes	-Participants connecting coursework to their background knowledge -Participants studying course material
<i>Expressing Preferences</i>	Students communicating their needs, likes, and dislikes to teachers	-Participants communicating their preferences related to course assignments to teachers

Findings

In this section, the three case presentations first appear as separate subsections. The case presentations will highlight self-determination skills that were evident throughout the participants' descriptions of their class and learning experiences: self-awareness, self-regulation and expressing preferences. We present each of these skills as three separate themes. Although choice/decision making also manifested in their descriptions, we did not include choice/decision making as a separate theme because they were an integral part of the other three themes. We also describe indicators of the participants' behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement that emerged in connection with the self-determination skills. For the first theme, *self-awareness*, indicators of the participants' engagement in school are illustrated in their descriptions of how they responded to the alignment or misalignment between their goals, interests, likes, and preferences and their teachers' instructional practices. For the second and third themes, *self-regulation* and *expressing preferences*, exemplars of the students' cognitive, affective, or behavioral engagement are illuminated in the participants' descriptions of their reactions (or how they perceived they would react) to using those specific self-determination skills in the classroom. After detailing each individual case, we end this section with a presentation of the cross-case analysis.

Allen

Self-awareness. Allen began attending Warrior High School during fourth grade. He expressed positive views about the school. For example, Allen liked how his teachers took time to “get to know students” and “see things from [students'] perspectives instead of theirs.” Allen explained that he enjoyed reading, working in groups, and completing moderately challenging assignments to “learn something new.” He also liked engaging in science related activities/projects because he “liked all kinds of science.” For example, while many of his classmates presented on social justice related issues for a class presentation in their English class, Allen's presentation focused on the air quality on Earth.

Although he did like to “read a lot,” he emphasized that assigned readings in his classes were boring at times, which made it easier for him to “lose focus.” Allen noted that he preferred to work in groups with people who knew him and how he thinks. He had this preference because he felt more comfortable asking them questions, and he enjoyed engaging in meaningful discussions about the material with them. However, he noted that teachers frequently generated the groups for the students, which at times resulted in him choosing not to participate in certain tasks. As an example, the first author observed Allen not contributing to a group discussion in his English class during one of the classroom observations. Allen explained that he chose not to participate because he felt “pressured” and “forced” to talk to his classmates by his teacher, rather than choosing to engage in dialogue on his own. Furthermore, Allen emphasized that he did not like completing work that was too hard or perceived as unnecessary (i.e., math problems), because he would often “sit there [and] get off-task a lot,” or “not work as hard,” when required to complete such tasks.

Self-regulation. Even though Allen became disengaged at times, he did try to “eventually finish” many of his assignments by choosing to use a variety of strategies. For instance, he often thought *maybe it'll get better* to keep himself from giving up when reading non-preferred books. He also tried to think about how assignments were related to his goals (i.e., wanting to become a Pharmacist), because it made him “work a little bit harder and try to get it done.” Additionally,

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Allen liked to listen to music while completing his work because it motivated him and helped him “focus.” Finally, Allen reached out to his peers and teachers for help when teachers required him to complete work that he perceived as too challenging.

Expressing preferences. Allen believed that if teachers understood and responded to what he and other students wanted, students would be “encouraged” to complete more work. He also believed that teachers would understand students more if students approached them and shared what they liked and were interested in completing. Thus, alongside the strategies he used to complete class assignments and keep himself focused, Allen expressed instructional changes he wanted to see his teachers make so that he would want to work harder and not “half do it.” He wanted his teachers to allow students to choose how they demonstrated an understanding of course material more frequently, be more flexible with their due dates, and explain how assignments were relevant to his goals. However, he chose to rarely share his thoughts about class material to his teachers, unless teachers were “fun,” held similar interests as him, and demonstrated a desire to get to know students. According to Allen, his science and English teacher were the only instructors who displayed those characteristics. He also shared his thoughts about class material if he was passionate about a specific assignment/activity. Overall, when asked what helped him become aware of what he liked in school, what helped him succeed, and what motivated him, Allen noted, “I don’t really know. I guess I like tried things. I think that’s about it. I like tried things and found out that I really don’t like it at all. And then I just found something[s] that actually work.”

Dakota

Self-awareness. Dakota began attending Warrior High School during second grade. He generally expressed positive views about the school. Dakota liked that the people were “nice” and teachers recognized him as an individual. He primarily enjoyed completing assignments that allowed him to draw and make or watch videos. Dakota enjoyed drawing and making/watching videos because he desired “to be an animator and go into the drawing business.” Furthermore, he viewed himself as a “visual learner” who understood his schoolwork more when teachers paired the content with videos and pictures. For example, he explained that he enjoyed working on a note taking activity the researcher observed him completing in biology class because the teacher permitted students to draw pictures next to key ideas to remember essential course concepts. Dakota also noted that he preferred a healthy degree of challenging work because it helped him “be prepared for college.”

Over the course of five individual interviews with Dakota, he seldom expressed negative views about his teachers’ instructional practices. Consequently, Dakota rarely exhibited signs or described examples of not being engaged in his class assignments and activities. For instance, he indicated that while procrastination was something he did in all his classes, he only procrastinated “every now and then.” Even though he became “sluggish” and had difficulties comprehending the text when he was required to read books that he viewed as “boring,” he still made sure that he comprehended and finished reading the books by choosing to reach out to others for help. It was important for Dakota to do well in school (including understanding what he was learning) so that he could attend college and have the career that he wanted rather than a “desk job.” Thus, instead of critiquing his teachers’ instructional practices, Dakota spent most of his time discussing a variety of strategies he chose to employ to complete and understand his classwork, even when assignments were “boring,” too challenging, or not aligned with his interests.

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Self-regulation. First, Dakota explained that when his assignments were too challenging he became frustrated and experienced difficulties comprehending what teachers were saying. When this occurred he typically asked, “a lot of questions to teachers or fellow students,” or he chose to “wait and listen and learn” instead of completely checking out. He also tried to learn what concepts “mean” or “do” instead of simply memorizing facts by monitoring his level of understanding, looking at “past notes,” and testing himself before taking quizzes and exams. Further, Dakota tried to make connections between his interests and course concepts (e.g., thinking of the “Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtles” while completing an assignment about genetic mutations) to make less interesting work more interesting. Finally, although he sometimes became off-task due to procrastinating, he made schedules outlining when he would complete his work and take short breaks to avoid getting completely off-task to watch “YouTube videos.”

Expressing preferences. Dakota also acknowledged that it was important for teachers to understand students to help students be successful. Like the other participants, Dakota was more willing to share his perspectives about class material and communicate his needs when teachers had similar interests and displayed a good attitude. Yet, he rarely expressed his thoughts about class material. He believed that it was important for teachers to understand students to help them do “what they want to do in life” (e.g., attend college) as opposed to adapting their instructional practices to meet students’ preferences, wants, and needs. When the interviewer asked Dakota what helped him become aware of what he liked in school, what helped him succeed, and what motivated him, he explained that he chose to “experiment” with “different stuff” (various strategies) until he took “a liking” to one thing versus another.

Wade

Self-awareness. Wade began attending Warrior High School during fourth grade. His goal was to become a Basketball Scout when he graduated high school because he loved sports. Wade stated that Warrior High School was “alright” when asked how he felt about attending the school. While he enjoyed being around his friends, he did not have positive relationships with all his teachers. Wade believed some teachers were always “smart” (or sarcastic) when interacting with him. He often felt like some teachers continued to “watch” his every move, which made him feel “weird” and misunderstood. On the other hand, he frequently mentioned that he had a strong positive relationship with his algebra teacher because she was “fun” and understood students more than other teachers.

Wade liked completing “individual writing” activities in all of his classes, such as writing essays, constructing projects and completing “packets” of work. Unless teachers permitted him to work with his friends, he preferred to complete activities and assignments independently rather than work in groups. Wade felt more “comfortable” collaborating with people who knew him well. He explained that being paired with his friends made it more “fun” to complete classwork and increased his willingness to finish assignments. As an example, the first author observed Wade working with his best friend (another Black male) in his algebra class after his teacher permitted the students to work individually or with a peer. Wade and his friend were smiling, laughing, and making jokes. However, they were also attentive, focused, and completed the assignment until the teacher dismissed the class for lunch fifty minutes later, as evidenced by the observer seeing the two students write the required content down promptly and following the teacher’s instructions. Finally, Wade, like Allen and Dakota, preferred to complete moderately challenging work: “I don’t want it [work] easy. I guess I feel like I won’t be learning nothing like nothing new.” Despite his

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desire to work with his friends more often, Wade indicated that he rarely had the chance to do so since teachers regularly determined with whom students had to work. Consequently, he frequently mentioned that many of his classes were “boring,” which resulted in him feeling the urge to fall asleep in class or choosing to not “pay attention” instead of completing his schoolwork.

Self-regulation. Wade noted that he did not work as fast when his assignments were too challenging. He also was more likely to be inattentive when his assignments were boring. However, like the other participants, he rarely stopped doing his work altogether. Instead, Wade also used a few strategies to manage his engagement with assignments and class activities. According to Wade, he chose to connect assignments to his “background knowledge” to “understand more,” “listen[ed] to music” to avoid giving up and sought help from his teachers to ensure that he comprehended vital information.

Expressing preferences. Wade also identified instructional changes he wanted teachers to make so that he and other students could view assignments as “fun,” make “good grades,” and “really want to” complete their work. He wanted teachers to allow students to choose their partners for group work, discuss how his schoolwork connected to the “real world,” and utilize more updated technology for class assignments. Wade stressed that unlike most of his teachers who rarely described the link between class assignments and the real world, his algebra teacher regularly connected class assignments to life outside of school. Accordingly, the first author observed Wade’s math teacher facilitating a lesson that required students to generate a post-graduation budget and calculate how much money they would need to pay for various expenditures. Wade seemed to enjoy this assignment, as he added personally meaningful items to his list (e.g., new sneakers), eagerly shared what he included in his list with his teacher and smiled/laughed while completing the assignment.

Similar to Allen’s descriptions, Wade emphasized that teachers should get to know students to understand the instructional changes students desired to see. However, he rarely chose to express what he liked and preferred to his teachers so that they could adapt their teaching to meet his wants and needs. Wade further explained that he did not share his preferences to teachers because he believed that teachers “don’t care” to get to know students and they would probably “write him up” for expressing his opinions about class material. He did, however, mention that he most frequently shared his opinions with his math teacher, because she often listened to students’ point of view and held conversations with students to get to know them. In fact, the first author observed Wade passionately tell his math teacher that a class assignment was “boring.” The teacher did not show visible signs of becoming upset and calmly redirected Wade to sit at his desk and wait for instructions. All in all, Wade suggested that he become aware of what he liked in school, what helped him succeed, and what motivated him by reflecting upon his “previous experiences” with “different” teachers. Having been previously taught by what he perceived as “...cool teachers, lame teachers, aggravating teachers, nosey teachers, talk too much teachers, [and] talk too slow teachers” helped Wade learn what works for him.

Cross-Case Analysis

Table 3 summarizes the cross-case analysis as described in the subsequent paragraphs.

Table 3.

Interaction between the Self-Determination Skills and Indicators of Student Engagement

Self-Determination Skill	Description of Interaction	Behavioral Engagement	Affective Engagement	Cognitive Engagement
<i>Self-Awareness</i>	Being aware of their goals, interests, dislikes, likes, and preferences prompted the students to engage with assignments and activities when their goals, interests, likes, and preferences were honored by teachers.	The participants were more likely to complete their work and participate in class when assignments and activities aligned with their goals, interests, likes, and preferences.	The participants were happy and enjoyed completing assignments and activities when they aligned with the students' goals, interests, likes, and preferences.	Dakota reduced the effort he put into completing his schoolwork, which lead to limited comprehension of course material, when assignments and activities misaligned with his goals, interests, likes, and preferences.
	Being aware of their goals, interests, dislikes, likes, and preferences prompted the students to disengage with assignments and activities when their goals, interests, likes, and preferences were not honored by teachers.	The participants were more inclined to lose focus, not pay attention, reduce classroom participation, and become off-task when assignments and activities misaligned with their goals, interests, likes, and preferences.	The participants viewed their assignments and class activities as boring when they misaligned with the students' goals, interests, likes, and preferences	
<i>Self-Regulation</i>	Choosing to use various self-regulated learning strategies helped the participants maintain and increase their engagement when a misalignment between their goals, interests, likes, and preferences, and class activities and assignments was apparent.	The participants completed their assignments and stayed on task more by using multiple self-regulated leaning strategies.	Dakota viewed work as more interesting when he intentionally connected learning to his personal life/experiences.	The participants increased the depth of their understanding of course content by using self-regulated learning strategies.

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Table 3. (continued)

Interaction between the Self-Determination Skills and Indicators of Student Engagement

Self-Determination Skill	Description of Interaction	Behavioral Engagement	Affective Engagement	Cognitive Engagement
<i>Expressing Preferences</i>	The participants expressing their preferences (including their likes, dislikes, and interests) to teachers influenced teachers to align class assignments and activities with the students' preferences, and ultimately increased/maintained the participants' engagement.	Allen and Wade believed they would complete assignments more often if teachers adapted assignments and activities to be consistent with students' preferences, in response to the participants communicating their preferences to teachers.	Wade believed assignments and class activities would be more fun if teachers adapted assignments and activities to be consistent with his preferences, in response to communicating his preferences to teachers.	N/A

Self-awareness. Regarding the participants' self-awareness, all the participants were aware of their goals, interests, likes, dislikes, and preferences. They were more engaged when their goals, interests, likes, and preferences were honored through class assignments. In contrast, they were less engaged when classroom teachers did not honor their goals, interests, likes, and preferences. For example, Allen enjoyed completing assignments (affective engagement) and he was more inclined to participate in class and complete his school work (behavioral engagement) when teachers allowed him to read preferred books, work in groups with students of his choosing, complete moderately challenging work, and complete science related activities. In contrast, he was more likely to experience boredom (limited affective engagement), lose focus (limited behavioral engagement), reduce his classroom participation and become off-task (limited behavioral engagement) when teachers did not permit him to complete these types of assignments. Similarly, Dakota enjoyed (affective engagement) completing assignments that permitted him to draw pictures and make or watch videos. He also preferred challenging work because it helped him prepare for college. Although rare in occurrence, Dakota commented that he viewed work as boring (limited affective engagement) when his likes, interests and preferences were not honored. When he perceived work as boring, he became sluggish with work completion and failed to comprehend his assignments (limited behavioral and cognitive engagement). Finally, Wade was happy (affective engagement) completing individual writing activities, working with his friends, and completing projects and packets of work individually. He also preferred to complete moderately challenging assignments. However, Wade explained that teachers rarely allowed him to complete enjoyable and preferred assignments/activities. Thus, he often felt bored (limited affective engagement) and chose not to participate or pay attention (limited behavioral engagement) in class. The descriptions of how they reacted when they experienced limited engagement suggested that to some degree, being engaged or disengaged was a personal choice.

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Self-regulation. Despite becoming disengaged when their goals, preferences, likes, and interests were not honored, the participants chose to increase or maintain their engagement by using different self-regulated learning strategies. Allen asserted that he finished his assignments (behavioral engagement) and increased his understanding of course content (cognitive engagement) by telling himself things will get better, thinking about his goals, listening to music, and asking his teachers and peers for help. Dakota also asked his teachers and peers for help, in addition to listening intently to class instruction, connecting learning material to his personal life/experiences, studying, and creating schedules. Using these strategies helped Dakota to complete his assignments (behavioral engagement), stay on-task (behavioral engagement), view his work as interesting (affective engagement), and increase his understanding of course material (cognitive engagement). Finally, Wade connected assignments to his background knowledge and asked teachers for help to understand the material (cognitive engagement). He also listened to music to avoid giving up/not completing his assignments (behavioral engagement).

Express preferences. The participants (i.e., Allen and Wade) indicated they were not solely responsible for maintaining or increasing their engagement in school. Allen and Wade explained that teachers making changes to their classroom instruction was as important as the self-regulation efforts they initiated. Allen and Wade stated they would complete their work more often (behavioral engagement) and Wade believed his assignments would be “more fun” (affective engagement) if teachers knew what students wanted and adapted their instruction accordingly. Although the young men noted that expressing their preferences (including their likes, dislikes, and interests) helped teachers understand what they wanted, the participants stressed that they rarely expressed their preferences to teachers. They only communicated their preferences to teachers who demonstrated a desire to get to know them, shared common interests, were supportive, or had good attitudes; and Wade commented that few teachers met these criteria because they did not care about students. Furthermore, Wade specifically refrained from sharing his preferences because he feared that teachers would give him an office discipline referral or “write him up” if they did not like what he had to say.

Discussion

A great deal of research has revealed contextual and structural variables that foster and hinder Black male students’ achievement and engagement in school. Although scholars should not discredit or negate such structural and contextual variables, researchers like Lozenski (2017) argue that it is equally (if not more) important to expand our attention to Black students’ self-determination in school. Lozenski contends that the U.S. educational system has never been responsive to the needs of Black students; thus, shifting the focus to Black students’ self-determination might provide new insights into how they can be empowered to contribute to their own success while “waiting” on the system to change in their favor. Like the six resilient Black high school youth who participated in the O’Connor (1997) study, Black male students who acquire a strong sense of agency and self-determination in the midst of experiencing institutional and environmental barriers to their success may be more equipped to overcome such barriers due to possessing a personal protective factor. In fact, Wehmeyer et al. (2011) posited that additional research is needed to understand culturally diverse students’ use of self-determination skills, considering their experiences with inequitable treatment.

CAT is an empirically established theory that researchers and educators can use to a greater extent to understand and strengthen Black male students’ personal agency, self-determination, and

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subsequent engagement/achievement in school. Indeed, one of the promising aspects of CAT is its integration of several personal variables that influence students' success, rather than viewing each individual variable (or each self-determination skill) as an isolated construct. Even though it is well-established that self-regulation, goal setting and attainment, choice/decision making, and other self-determination skills promote success among students with and without disabilities (including Black males), few studies have investigated how the range of self-determination skills operate together and collectively impact Black male students' engagement in school. Consequently, we are unaware of any studies to date that have examined non-disabled ninth grade Black male students' educational experiences from a CAT perspective.

Before educators adopt new or existing theories as conceptual frameworks for guiding their day-to-day practice with students from a target group, researchers should provide evidence for the application of such theories among the said group of students. Unlike existing scholarship, this study provides some empirical support for why CAT could be utilized to understand and cultivate personal agency and self-determination among non-disabled ninth grade Black males. Based on the current study, educators also may consider students' applied experiences with CAT as one explanation for non-disabled ninth grade Black male students' (under)achievement in school.

This study also is unique in its investigation of the interaction between student engagement and self-determination skills from a person-centered approach using qualitative methodology. We found that the interaction between indicators of student engagement and self-determination skills occurred through a synergistic operation of multiple self-determination skills. Most research on self-determination skill promotion is limited to students with disabilities. The current study adds to the literature base as the findings demonstrate that underachieving students without disabilities can benefit from self-determination skill use and development as well. Furthermore, researchers have mainly used bivariate and multivariate analyses to examine the relationships between general education students' engagement in school and a few self-determination skills in isolation. In contrast, the methodology we used for the current study—qualitative case study methodology—revealed how the participants' concurrent use of multiple self-determination skills contributed to their engagement in school. The research findings also showed shared and unique differences between the three participants, as well as contextual factors embedded in their experiences. Thus, the results of this study provide greater depth to understanding how these constructs may operate for individual Black male students without disabilities, and key findings highlight the need to consider environmental variables when seeking to promote Black male students' self-determination skill use in the school.

Field and Hoffman (1994) postulated that self-awareness is the foundation of all self-determination skills as a person cannot act on his or her behalf without knowing one's goals, needs, preferences, interests, strengths, and weaknesses. Consequently, the participants' self-awareness served as a basis for their engagement in school and simultaneous use of other self-determination skills. The participants were aware of their individual goals, interests, likes, dislikes, and preferences. Being aware of their goals, interests, likes, dislikes, and preferences prompted them to engage or disengage with class assignments and activities that aligned or misaligned with these aspects of their identity, respectively. Consistent with the idea of acting on one's behalf, the participants chose to manage their engagement instead of giving up when teachers required them to complete class assignments and activities that misaligned with their goals, interests, likes, and preferences. They explained that choosing to use various self-regulated learning strategies and expressing their preferences to classroom teachers resulted in them experiencing various indicators of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement instead of experiencing limited engagement in

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each of these areas. Such a finding is consistent with CAT which posits that individuals can cause certain outcomes to occur in their lives by carrying out specific actions (Wehmeyer, 2004).

In terms of self-regulation, the participants used a variety of self-regulated learning strategies to maintain or increase their engagement with class activities and assignments. According to Zimmerman (1990) and Zimmerman (2002), self-regulated learning strategies include, but are not limited to, goal setting and evaluating progress towards one's goals; using self-motivation techniques (e.g., generating specific thoughts about class assignments and imposing self-consequences); using effective study methods; asking for social assistance (i.e., help from teachers and peers); and managing one's time. Examples of the participants' use of these strategies included: reminding themselves of the connection between their assignments and post-secondary goals (goal setting and self-motivation); connecting new material to background knowledge or personal interests (use of study methods and self-motivation); monitoring their understanding of class content (use of study methods); making course schedules (time management); and asking teachers and peers for help (seek social assistance). Overall, the participants conveyed that using one or more self-regulated learning strategies had some influence over an aspect of their affective, behavioral, or cognitive engagement.

Nevertheless, Wade and Allen stressed that teachers played a role in bolstering students' engagement as well through their use of relevant and interesting instructional material. The participants further explained that students could elicit a desired change in teachers' classroom instruction by communicating their preferences to teachers. Therefore, expressing their preferences to teachers was another action the participants employed to experience more positive feelings about their work and complete activities and assignments. It is important to note that the participants indicated how teachers responded (i.e., adapting instruction) to students communicating their preferences would result in increased engagement, rather than the act of expressing their preferences in and of itself. Reeve (2013) reported complimentary results in a quantitative study conducted with Korean adolescents. In particular, Reeve found that teachers' instructional approach mediated the relationship between students' expression of preferences (and other related behaviors) and their affective, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. Hence, readers should be cautious about assuming that there is a direct causal link between students expressing their preferences and being engaged in school.

Although the young men identified expressing preferences as a self-determination skill they utilized to manage their engagement, they all reported they rarely used that particular skill. Wade refused to express his preferences to most of his classroom teachers because he believed teachers did not care about him and they would punish him if they did not like what he shared. Additionally, Wade and Allen rarely expressed their preferences due to having few close relationships with their teachers. Dakota's accounts suggested that he did not see a need to try to convince teachers to adapt their instruction. Instead, he mainly relied on his use of self-regulated learning strategies to manage his engagement. Like some of the participants in Allen's (2017) study, Dakota appeared to subscribe to the belief that personal responsibility was enough for experiencing success in school. On the other hand, Wade and Allen challenged the notion that meritocracy, that is "pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps," was all it took to be engaged in school. Black male students' use of self-determination skills may be insufficient if teachers refuse to adapt their instructional approach and create a supportive environment that encourage Black males to express who they are and what they need. In the same vein, Black male students may not execute all self-determination skills due to the belief that teachers do not care, as evidenced by Wade's hesitation to communicate his preferences because he did not believe his teachers cared

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about him. Wade's sentiments also suggest that Black male students may not express their preferences to avoid punishment. These assumptions are further supported by researchers who found Black male students are likely to have few positive student-teacher relationships and receive harsher sanctions for exhibiting behaviors teachers perceive as rude and disrespectful (Allen 2017; Caton, 2012; Dotterer et al., 2009; Monroe, 2005).

Implications for Practice

We sought to examine the connection between exemplars of self-determination skills and indicators of students' engagement by examining the school experiences of three ninth grade, non-disabled, underachieving Black males. This study found that the students' concurrent use of multiple self-determination skills impacted their engagement in school. Schools have historically limited their focus on promoting all self-determination skills to students with disabilities. Extant research has demonstrated an increase in self-determination skill use and involvement in educational planning among students with disabilities after participating in school interventions targeting a range of self-determination skills (e.g., Wehmeyer, Palmer, Lee, Williams-Diehm, & Shogren, 2011; Wehmeyer et al., 2012). Conversely, few studies have been executed similarly for students without disabilities. Consistent with this general trend, the young men in the current study suggested they did not receive any direct instruction on how to develop and utilize key self-determination skills, even though skills that are typically not attended to in general education practice and research (i.e., self-awareness and expressing preferences) interacted with indicators of their engagement in school. Washington, Hughes, and Cosgriff (2012) studied the impact of self-determination skill use among a predominately Black sample of high school youth. The researchers found that non-disabled students who reported frequent use of multiple self-determination skills experienced high academic achievement and were on-track to graduate from high school. As academic achievement and student engagement are significantly associated (Conner & Pope, 2013; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Lam et al., 2012), the findings of this study in conjunction with prior studies beg the question: how can educators apply CAT in school settings to help all students (including Black males) develop and utilize a broader range of self-determination skills to improve their educational outcomes (i.e., engagement and achievement)?

Proponents of CAT and self-determination skill instruction assert that educators could help all students develop and use multiple self-determination skills through the implementation of MTSS (Shogren, Wehmeyer, & Lane, 2016; Wehmeyer, 2015). In this regard, educators can incorporate self-determination skill promotion in general education classrooms for all students or through small group and individualized interventions provided for underachieving students (Shogren et al., 2016). One of the core tenants of MTSS is an emphasis on utilizing evidence-based interventions (Walker & Shinn, 2010). Scholars developed most of the empirically established self-determination interventions to support students with disabilities (e.g., Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test & Wood, 2001; Konrad, Fowler, Walker, Test, & Wood, 2007). However, teachers and other interventionists could implement programs such as the Steps to Self-Determination Curriculum, the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) and the Self-Regulated Empowerment Program (SREP) in school settings across multiple levels of support (tiers 1, 2 and 3) to promote a broad range of self-determination skills for students without disabilities (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Rowe, Mazzotti, & Sinclair, 2015). For example, SREP is a self-regulated learning strategy program that addresses self-regulation, self-awareness, goal setting, problem-solving and self-efficacy. Cleary, Platten, and Nelson (2008) tested the

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effects of the SREP among ninth grade biology students enrolled in an urban high school (78% of the students were Black and 67% qualified for free/reduced price lunch). The researchers found that students who participated in the SREP intervention utilized more self-regulated learning strategies, demonstrated increased self-efficacy, and had higher test scores in class compared to students who did not receive the intervention.

It also is important to address environmental and relational variables that may preclude Black males from developing and utilizing the full range of self-determination skills. Teachers may experience difficulties supporting the development of these skills due to their (a) limited knowledge about how to teach the skills to students (Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, & Tamura, 2002), (b) beliefs about who would benefit from skill development and which skills are more/less essential (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang, 2008; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000), and (c) time constraints (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000). Therefore, educators may benefit from relevant professional development (Wehmeyer, 2015) and administrators should consider utilizing other personnel (e.g., school psychologists and school counselors; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004) to help students improve their use of self-determination skills. Finally, Black male students are likely to experience discrimination by teachers (Dotterer et al., 2009), develop poor relationships with classroom teachers (Caton, 2012), and have classroom experiences that may discourage them from sharing who they are and what they need (Allen 2017; Caton, 2012; Howard, 2008). It is then incumbent upon teachers and school leaders to create a welcoming climate for all students and address unjust policies and practices that disproportionality target Black male students. Initiating and sustaining these systems-level efforts might empower Black adolescent males to benefit from and execute multiple self-determination skills in class and the broader school environment.

Limitations and Future Research

Due to the small sample size and recruitment of students from one school, the results of this study may not represent the experiences of similar students. We also did not explicitly ask the students to describe how the various component elements of self-determination impacted their engagement in school, nor did we ask students about barriers to using these skills (e.g., racism, student-teacher interactions, etc.). Although our approach aligned with recommendations for qualitative case study research (Yin, 2014), such questions may have yielded rich discussions centered on the students' interpretations of how the various self-determination skills facilitated their engagement in school and external factors that influenced their use of these skills. Furthermore, we did not investigate to what extent did the participants' use of various self-determination skills contribute to their engagement and academic achievement over time, nor did we compare their use of self-determination skills to other students. Such an examination may have revealed whether the frequency of self-determination skill use predicted greater engagement and achievement among the participants and other groups of students. Scholars could conduct additional research to (a) determine to what extent does diverse students' use of multiple self-determination skills predict their engagement and achievement in school, (b) understand how these students perceive the relationship between self-determination skills and their educational outcomes, and (c) identify personal and environmental barriers that may preclude these students from using various self-determination skills.

Despite these limitations, the findings from the current study support efforts to improve Black ninth grade males' engagement in school by promoting their development and use of self-determination skills. With respect to educational research, this study may serve as a foundation for

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the initiation of innovative and timely studies aimed at investigating the impact of self-determination skill promotion among non-disabled, underachieving Black high school males. As the study also reinforces previous scholarship indicating that self-determination skills matter for all students, the results highlight a need for educators to help Black male students utilize a broader range of self-determination skills to cultivate their academic success. Finally, findings from this study suggest that structural barriers, such as punitive discipline and poor relationships with classroom teachers, may prevent Black males from benefiting from and utilizing all self-determination skills in school. If systemic factors that maintain racial inequities are not challenged and addressed, teaching Black males to use the full range of self-determination skills may be insufficient and further perpetuate disparate achievement and engagement among this group of students.

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