Building Relationships for Student Engagement:

Enhancing the AVID Tutoring Approach in Freshman Classrooms

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The Phenomenon

The AVID tutoring process is a tutoring model that features a scaffolded and supportive approach to help students exercise their "inquiry muscles" (AVID, 2014, para. 1). Before tutoring, students identify a question they have about the material from an academic class. During tutoring, they present their question and share the steps they have taken to try to understand the problem. The tutor and group members then ask questions instead of offering answers to the student presenter, working together to help the presenter find a solution. After the session, students reflect on their learning, identifying what resources and/or strategies helped them better understand the concept or problem. The AVID model of tutoring, however, only works if the students are willing to participate in the collaborative process.

It doesn't help that Sierra High admits some students into the AVID program involuntarily, effectively disregarding the fact that AVID is a program that is built on student advancement via *individual* determination, hence "AVID". This misalignment with the program's mission and school's admittance of freshmen into AVID lowers the prevalence of a leadership spirit and an academically eager student body that students who want to be in AVID typically exhibit. Additionally, enrolling students in AVID who don't want to be in the program and haven't an option to switch out gives them the feeling that they are not in control of their educational destiny–this is detrimental toward their overall motivation to succeed in the school environment.

Student perception of AVID in this negative light results in apathy toward the AVID program from both types of students. This apathy materializes during tutorials, making it extremely difficult to follow the tutoring model.

Considering this issue and the wide range of student personalities that might adversely affect a student's willingness to participate during the tutorial process, it becomes challenging for this model to serve any purpose, thus reinforcing student apathy toward the AVID program. This project aims to help AVID educators and tutors better understand how they can address student apathy given the circumstances in order to extract the full benefits of this tutoring model. Additionally, it serves as a reminder to educators and tutors about the importance of developing relationships with students and encouraging peer interaction. Finally, it calls for administrative action: a reevaluation of the admission policy into the AVID program at Sierra High.

Research Questions

Through an iterative process of pattern recognition and data collection, my research questions have taken form as ambitious inquiries which have continuously reframed the lens through which I have evaluated the issues surrounding student apathy, motivation, participation, and relational dynamics in the context of the AVID tutoring process. These questions are:

1. *What approaches can be taken by educators to overcome student apathy?*

2. *How do different classroom actors and environmental factors affect student engagement levels?*

3. *What approaches can be taken to foster engagement and cultivate healthy environmental classroom conditions for the tutorial process in the freshman AVID classroom?*

Conceptual framework

In order to understand how educators can help students overcome apathy, one must fully understand what the sentiment's parameters and genesis are. Student apathy has been defined as a lack of motivation or disinterest in learning (Bosserman, 2019). Characterized by "indifference, resentfulness, hostility, or a general lack of enthusiasm" (Bosserman, 2019, p. 20), student apathy is a complex, multifaceted problem that is intricately tied to student engagement levels (Schou, 2015). Because student apathy has the potential to disrupt classroom activities, targeting it is vital to the success of classroom activities like AVID tutorials, which require high levels of student engagement.

It's important to highlight factors extending beyond the classroom–such as behavioral problems, manifestations or other mental health issues, or environmental issues like home environment, culture, or socioeconomic status–that could be a reason for the outcome of student apathy and lower levels of engagement (Bosserman, 2019). These factors affect student engagement levels and should be considered when diagnosing where a student's apathetic attitude comes from. However, it is also very much possible that the classroom environment established by the teacher and classroom culture created by peers begets or furthers apathetic student sentiment.

As previously stated, student apathy is tied to student engagement. As defined in this paper, engagement is interaction between classroom actors. Primarily, engagement describes conversational interaction in this paper. Engagement encompasses student-student interaction, student-teacher interaction, and student-tutor interaction. While tutor-teacher interaction might occur, it is not as significant an interaction as is student-student interaction, for example, during the tutorial process.

The following framework draws from experiential knowledge to illustrate relational dynamics in the classroom and the capacity of those dynamics to affect individual student engagement:
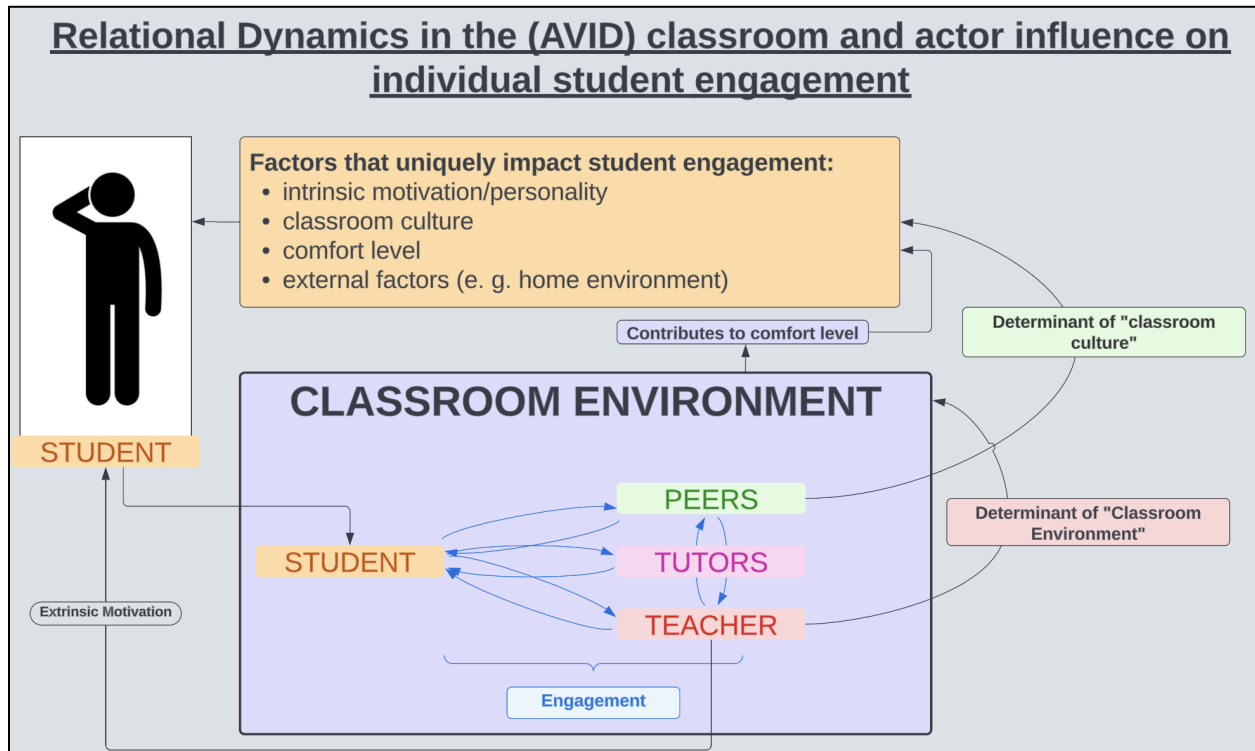

Figure 1: Relational Dynamics in the (AVID) classroom and actor influence on individual student engagement

Although factors affecting student engagement are cumbersome and complex–which encompasses the implications of student apathy for engagement–teachers have the potential to impact a student's perception of their own academic success; the environment they create is a determinant of a student's comfort level in the classroom. Additionally, teachers can also externally motivate students. In Nugent Tisome's doctoral dissertation, *The Impact of Teacher-Student Interaction on Student Motivation and Achievement*, she postulates that "efficacy and perhaps even empathy may have a greater impact on a child's success than a

teacher's mastery of the content," (Nugent, 2009, p. 24). This gives reason to believe that the environment a teacher establishes directly affects a student's academic achievement. If AVID educators and tutors are able to establish a healthy environment, this has the potential to break down the walls of student apathy, resulting in higher levels of student engagement and better overall student opinion of the AVID program at Sierra High. Implications of this could entail the empowerment of students in their ability to control their education and the reinvigoration of academic passion in the AVID program.

Through a comprehensive review of existing research on student apathy and relational dynamics in the classroom, I found potential explanations for the issue I observed: that student apathy is causing a lack of engagement and teachers (and potentially tutors) have the power to overcome student apathy by establishing a better classroom environment. I proposed a conceptual framework that illustrates my understanding of relational dynamics. The framework shows how impactful a teacher's role is in establishing a healthy classroom environment. The question moving forward was *how* this "healthy environment" is achieved.

Positionality

This action research project took place in two different periods of high school freshman AVID classes in the same classroom at Sierra High. I engaged in action research, described by Coghlan and Brannick (2019) as "research *in* action, rather than *about* action," openly collaborating in a democratic partnership with the members of the process that was being studied in order to find some solution to the social/organizational issue at hand (Coghlan and Brannick, 2019, p. 3).

I am very familiar with the setting because I went to Sierra High for high school and I was an AVID student and tutor during my time there.

My role as an AVID tutor in the setting had a direct impact on the participants because it was my job to facilitate students during the tutoring process. I instructed students and directly engaged in conversation with them during our time together. In addition to this positionality of authority, the students may have been impacted by my positionality as an observer since they knew they were being observed.

Methods

Setting

This action research study took place during my spring semester of 2024. Because I am enrolled in all online classes this semester, I was able to conduct research in-person in a Southern California high school, Sierra High, rather than an educational setting close to Berkeley. This high school is located in Riverside, California. I tutored freshmen, juniors, and seniors at Sierra High but this project focuses on the freshman cohort of AVID students that I observed during third and sixth periods on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Population

The racial/ethnic makeup of Sierra High's students is majority Hispanic/Latino (80%), followed by White, Asian, Black, and multiracial, respectively. I am similar to the majority of the students in the aspect of ethnicity since I'm also Hispanic but different in the sense that I don't speak Spanish, which most students do, as well as all of the other AVID tutors and the freshman AVID teacher whose classroom I conducted my research in (Mr. A). According to U.S.News & World Report, 86% of students who attend Sierra High are economically disadvantaged (usnews.com, 2020-2022). Freshman AVID students (aged approximately 14 to 15 years old) in two AVID classes was the population of participants I observed. In particular, I tutored one focus group or "tutorial group" in each class: 5 students in third period (TG1) and 6 students in sixth

period (TG2). The majority of the students in either group are of the majority ethnic group of the school.

A notable difference between TG1 and TG2 is that the students in TG1 were completing IM1 math coursework while the students in TG2 were completing IM2 math coursework. This is significant because TG2 is one year ahead of the other group in the math curriculum at Sierra High.

Demographic information is relevant because it gives an idea of how cultural practices and norms might be perceived by the researcher. Additionally, "Without the inclusion of such information, researchers risk assuming the stance of "absolutism,"which assumes that the phenomena of interest are the same regardless of culture, race, ethnicity, and SES" (Hammer, 2011, p. 261).

Instruments

I recorded observational and conversational data in field notes, taking note of all engagement that I could recall between any classroom actors, including my own conversations with students. I voice recorded and took notes during semi-constructed interviews with the AVID coordinator, Mr. P; Mr. A; and an AVID tutor who facilitates another group of freshmen in both class periods, Tutor T. Finally, I asked Mr. A to instruct both groups of freshmen students to fill out an anonymous survey via Google Forms.

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Results

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Semi structured data findings

Semi structured interview data suggests that relationships are key to a healthy classroom environment/culture. In the semi structured interview with Mr. P, he felt that the classroom environment affects the comfort level of the students, specifically "how safe they feel to take a

risk." He also mentioned the need to create a "classroom culture" and the importance of

establishing relationships with the students, which will motivate students to take a risk and

engage in something that they are intimidated by. He mentioned that "The teacher setting up a

comfortable and safe classroom culture is important for student autonomy." Pearson further

mentioned that tutors can engage in the same types of interactions to build their connections with

the students; "It really comes down to that relationship-building." We talked about how in some

cases, students are not in AVID by choice. Sometimes parents demand their child take AVID,

resulting in student apathy toward the class as a whole and having a lack of motivation and

students not taking advantage of the support that AVID provides. Pearson said in this case that he

would speak with the student and "try to focus on the *why*–this is a class that helps support you

as a student, it's not an academic class and you have the ability to take advantage of the support

to help you be a better student." In summary, Pearson gave insight to the connection between

establishing relationships with students and participation. Teachers/tutors must be someone

familiar to students.

The interview with Tutor T suggests that adapting to individual student/group

personalities is a good approach for getting students to participate more, especially for freshmen.

When asked if he has employed any types of strategies when approaching an AVID group (as a

tutor), he says he "[tries] to understand [his] group and see how they work because every student

is different and a lot of them aren't in AVID by choice." He continued to say that telling jokes

makes students feel more comfortable and he feels that has worked the best for him. "It helps us

connect to their personalities and understand them better and for that reason, they end up

listening because you are connected to them. If you tell them to do something, they are more

likely to do it." Tutor T also mentioned that there is a difference between the intrinsic motivation

between freshmen and senior AVID students because seniors "are the students who want to be in AVID," while he has seen that students being "forced" to be in AVID is more of an issue in freshman courses. His solution to this would be to try to understand why the student doesn't want to be in AVID and try to get them to understand how they can benefit from AVID.

Data collected from the interview with Mr. A further stresses the necessity of a welcoming classroom environment and the importance of building relationships with students in order to optimize student engagement levels. Mr. A said that "[teachers and tutors] need to make sure we're building that 'relational capacity' within our classroom." When asked what factors he sees affecting student engagement the most, he said that the key to optimal engagement is to create an "environment where the students and tutors feel welcome." Mr. A also mentioned that there are some challenges that freshmen face, especially. They have to be vulnerable, which is not a habit for them but "part of the AVID program is building confidence," and being in a welcoming environment helps.

Mr. A also recognized the apathetic sentiments of some freshmen toward the tutorial process. When asked how he thinks tutors can personalize their help toward these types of students, he said that building a connection with a student can "win them over". "I think the more you're able to connect with a student, the more intentional we are and the student can become about being in the class and understanding the *why*. AVID isn't for everybody… it's up to the individual to make that assertion for themselves." Mr. A spoke about how he is individualizing his approaches with an apathetic student in hopes of motivating this student. "As a teacher if I show that I'm invested, my hope is that he will take that as like 'alright, this teacher knows that I can do it, I'm gonna show up, I'm gonna get things done'… But again, I'm there to advocate, I'm there to support but it's up to the student to really take charge of their education."

Across all three interviews, a common theme arose when it comes to developing an environment where students feel comfortable participating in the AVID tutorial process. All three interviewees stressed the importance of developing personal relationships with students. In this way, tutors become a conduit for critical thinking by encouraging students to participate. Tutor T expressed that in his experience, having these relationships actually results in students being more responsive to instruction and encouragement.

Observational and conversational data findings

Based on my own observations of the two freshman classes, there was a vast difference between levels of student-student engagement between TG1 and TG2. I had to facilitate engagement in TG1 much more than I did in TG2. In TG1, the students didn't ever volunteer to be the student presenter; I often had to choose a student to go up to the board. Additionally, TG1 students often did not come to class with a problem they were genuinely confused about so when they *did* go up to present, there wasn't much for the other students in the group to help with. In a conversation with a student from TG1 who often wore headphones or was on her phone during tutorials (Pam), she told me once that she was in AVID "as punishment" from her mother. At the time, Pam was failing AVID and had an A in math. One Tuesday, I told Pam that instead of filling out a Tutorial Request Form (TRF), she can bring a completed missing assignment from another class and I would give her full credit for the day. I told Pam that I want AVID to be enjoyable for her and not something she disliked. She got emotional during this conversation. Pam came that Thursday with her assignment submitted and I gave her full credit for the tutorial.

There were two students in TG1 who interact often, sometimes helping each other on math problems or talking about random things. The other three students did not talk to each other

voluntarily. Direct student-teacher interaction for TG1 was also limited for the most part. Sometimes Mr. A would call over a student to talk to them. Student-tutor engagement was the highest, almost all the time initiated by the tutor.

As for TG2, I find this group is very conversational and I have seen all students interacting with each other at one point or another. For the most part, the students don't volunteer to go up but when I ask, there isn't ever much resistance from a student. There is one student in this group who is not as talkative as the other students but she still participates with them during tutorials and usually talks regularly to one other student in the group. I find that TG2 comes to class with problems they actually need help on in class and are always willing to help the student presenter without the necessity of a tutor asking probing questions.

Interestingly, I had asked the members of both TG1 and TG2 if they know the people within their group from middle school and the majority of them from both groups do.

Student survey findings

I closed out my data collection with a voluntary student survey that covered six research question-relevant domains: relationships, participation, comfort, motivation, faculty opinions and feeling toward the AVID program. Twelve of the questions were Likert scale questions, one was multiple choice, and one was a free response question, totaling 14 questions. There was also a free response comment section. The aim of the survey was to get an overall feeling of the freshman students' opinions of AVID, specifically in regards to tutorials and to see if there were any correlations between variables. There were a total of 44 respondents for all questions except one. Responses to the question"Did you want to be enrolled in the AVID program" were only available from 20 participants.

I scored responses to Likert scale questions from -1 to 1, 1 being the most positive response and -1 being the least positive response. I created a correlation matrix based on the data, which indicated that there were strong positive correlations between the variable "I am comfortable in the classroom environment created by the AVID teacher and tutors" and multiple other variables:

	I am comfortable in the classroom environment created by the AVID teacher and tutors.	
I am comfortable participating in tutorials.	0.54	
Activities other than tutorials affect my feelings toward the AVID program positively.	0.55	
Tutorials affect my feelings toward the AVID program positively.	0.55	
My AVID teacher cares about my success in school.	0.54	
My AVID tutor cares about my success in school.	0.54	
I am motivated to excel in school.	0.53	

Figure 2: Correlation scores*

*Scale goes from -1 to 1. Scores 0.5+ are considered strong positive correlations.

Weak positive correlation was also found between "My AVID teacher cares about my success in school" and "I am motivated to excel in school" (a score of 0.39). No other significant correlations were found.

The survey data further revealed responses to the question "Did you want to be enrolled in the AVID program?" were split 50/50 between the 20 participants answering this question.
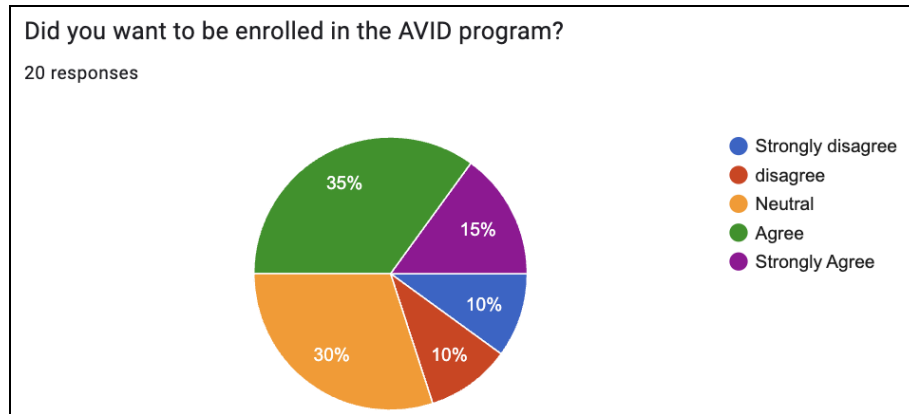
Figure 3: Survey question "Did you want to be enrolled in the AVID program?"

Discussion

This research aimed to help AVID educators and tutors better understand how they can address student apathy given the current circumstances around student admission into the program at Sierra High in order to extract the full benefits of this tutoring model. Semi structured interview responses indicated the importance of developing individualized relationships with students and encouraging peer interaction, all of which contributes to ways that educators can make their classrooms healthier environments for the AVID tutoring process. Finally, it calls into question Sierra High's admission policy for the AVID program.

Reflections on findings

Based on my experience being submerged in TG1, I assume that the main reason for low engagement in this group is because the students do not feel comfortable participating in this tutoring process. I tried using the suggestions from the interviews to develop a relationship with the students, which I think has positively impacted their levels of engagement. However, I don't see this group reaching the level of engagement that I see in TG2.

I saw a positive response from Pam after offering an individualized solution to her apathy towards tutorials. She now is more responsive to instruction to participate in tutorials, which

qualifies Tutor T's claims about students becoming more open to participate after you have a relationship with them.

Conclusion

Next Steps

If I were to continue conducting this project, I might consider interviews with parents and administrators. Perhaps I would survey other AVID cohorts, specifically on how long they have been in AVID and why they choose to stay. I might also observe a freshman AVID class's tutorials at another school. Additionally, I would consider level of rigor in the math class to be a variable to consider when measuring student engagement. I would also ask more survey questions as well as demographic questions in the survey so that stronger and more correlations overall might be found.

Limitations

A potential limitation of this project is that it is representative of a very specific population of research participants, weakening the generalizability of the results.

Because of my familiarity with this school site, the AVID program, and the AVID tutoring process, this might have led to unconscious biases that could have affected my interpretation of data or the conclusions I have drawn from it.

Additionally, the student survey was only representative of the students who volunteered to participate, and therefore is not representative of 100% of the freshman population of AVID students. Also, I can not distinguish between TG1/TG2 responses and that of the remaining freshman population, which might have given more context to what I observed in TG1 and TG2, in turn affecting the conclusions that were drawn. Furthermore, the freshman population is only one cohort of AVID students at Sierra High. Students who stay in the AVID program after

freshman year are more likely to do so at their own will, but there are still some students who

involuntarily stay in the program (some parents demand their child take AVID). This could

potentially mean that the sophomores, juniors, and seniors have an overall more positive attitude

toward AVID; a sentiment not reflected by this project's focus on the freshman cohort. Finally,

given the time constraints, the depth with which this research can be explored was not possible.

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Appendix

Interview protocol

Interview Planning for EDUC W144

Protocol

Reminders:
- **Don't react** to responses emotionally
- Avoid getting too far away from the main topic/domain but don't feel afraid to miss some questions because of time; **emphasize** those **factors** about which the **respondent most wants to talk.**
- Make note if the interviewee answers a question within a response that was actually later question to **avoid repetition**
- **Know the flow**

Interview timeline
- ☐ Explain the nature of research and receive oral consent from participants
- ☐ Ask demographic questions first
- ☐ Ask most important information first
- ☐ Probe and reframe questions
- ☐ Ending question (light) and goodbye

Interviewees and Question Structure

Interviewees
- ▉▉▉▉ - AVID coordinator
- Mr. A▉▉ - AVID teacher (key informant)
- ▉▉ - AVID tutor (key informant)

Domains

The domains are related to the research question and conceptual framework. They are identified through prior research related to the topic, information knowledge, and researcher experience. Keep in mind that these interviews may confirm or disconfirm the validity of domains and factors, and add new domains.

Independent domain	Student	Peers	Teachers/tutors
Dependent domain	Participation	Positive interactions	Motivation

*AVID coordinator is Mr. P; AVID Tutor is Tutor T

Questions

*consider order of questions and flow of conversation (see Schensul et. al 155)

How do different tutoring strategies stimulate student engagement levels for standard-level math students in a mixed-level AVID math room?

Tutor:
1. Can you give an example of a time you saw the AVID process working well?
   a. Can you explain what you did in this situation?
   b. Explain characteristics of students that you believe encourage other students to participate.
2. Explain how the environment a student is in might affect their engagement.
   a. What characteristics of a teacher do you think make students feel more comfortable?
   b. Ask about his experience!!!
   c. How do you think a positive relationship with a teacher or tutor affects a students' participation?
3. Have you ever experienced a negative interaction with a student?
   a. What would you say characterizes a negative interaction between students and instructional staff?
   b. How do these types of interactions affect a students' motivation?

Instructional Staff:

How do different tutoring strategies stimulate student engagement levels for standard-level math students in a mixed-level AVID math room?

1. Explain your definition of student engagement in the context of the AVID tutorial process.
   a. Can you explain a scenario where students are engaging?

2. Explain some factors that you think might influence student engagement in the AVID tutorial process (positive/negative impacts on engagement)?
   a. Personal factors
   b. Environmental factors

3. Explain your understanding of how student participation is best encouraged. You can use examples from your experience. By tutors?

4. What is the role of relationships between a tutor and the students in an AVID group?

5. What are the benefits of student engagement?
   a. Do you see any relationship between age-level and participation?
   b. Participation-achievement?

Student survey questions:

Domain: Relationships
1. I have a good relationship with the members in my AVID group.
2. The relationship I have with my AVID group positively affects tutorials.
3. I have a good relationship with my AVID tutor.

Domain: Motivation
1. I am motivated to excel in school.
   a. If yes, what motivates you to excel? If not, why don't you feel motivated? What do you think teachers and/or tutors can do to help you feel more motivated?

Domain: Participation
1. I only participate in tutorials because it affects my grade.
2. If tutorials did not affect your grade, what do you think would encourage you to participate in tutorials more?
   a. Comfort participating with my AVID group
   b. Genuine confusion on a problem
   c. Confidence that I know how to help the presenter
   d. Spatial factors (e.g. distance from board, seating arrangement, volume of presenter's voice, etc.)
   e. Other: ____

Domain: Comfort
1. I am comfortable in the classroom environment created by the AVID teacher and tutors.
2. I am comfortable participating in tutorials.

Domain: Feelings toward AVID program
1. Activities other than tutorials affect my feelings toward the AVID program positively.
2. Tutorials affect my feelings toward the AVID program positively.
3. Did you want to be enrolled in the AVID program?

Domain: Faculty opinions
1. My AVID teacher cares about my success in school.
2. My AVID tutor cares about my success in school.

Comments *

*blue highlight indicates free response questions