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# STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED, AFRICAN AMERICAN, MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS MAKING THE CHOICE TO BE AN EXCEPTION

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EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED,  
AFRICAN AMERICAN, MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS MAKING THE  
CHOICE TO BE AN EXCEPTION

A Dissertation in Education  
with a Concentration in Educational Leadership

by

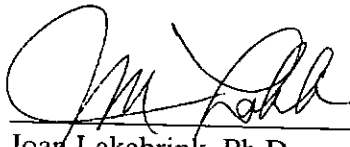
Tawanda Lawrence

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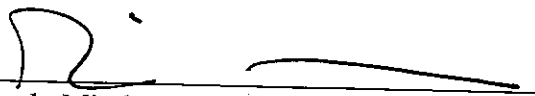
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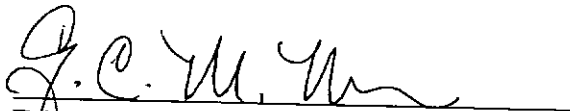
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to explore the lives of six, economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students who are demonstrating school success to discover how their home, school, and community experiences influenced their academic achievement.

A phenomenological inquiry approach was applied in this qualitative study to investigate the lived experiences of the student participants and identify the factors that contributed to their academic achievements in spite of the various challenges they encountered. The qualitative data consisted of three individual interviews. Using a semi-structured protocol, questions focused on the students' perceptions of the factors that contributed to their academic success and the challenges they experienced; how the students made meaning of their academic lives in the school setting; and how the students' home and community experiences influenced their academic achievement.

The seven step modified van Kaam method was employed to analyze the data obtained from the six student participants. The findings revealed that all six-student participants had the same perception of what it means to be a high achiever. Most of the student participants encountered challenges within family and home factors that varied, but the data revealed perceived negative influences of the community from most participants. However, all of the student participants developed ways to maintain their academic achievement despite their challenges. The student participants attributed their academic success to having an inner will to achieve, working hard, remaining focused, and staying out of trouble. Each of the student participants were goal oriented and aspired to attend college. Most of the student participants shared how their peers served

as a positive influence on their academic achievement by providing help with difficult work and serving as a motivator as they engaged in healthy competition. Student participants also identified teacher and parental support as having a positive impact on their academic achievement.

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**Striving for Excellence:**  
**Exploring the Experiences of Economically Disadvantaged, African American, Middle School**  
**Students making the Choice to be an Exception**

**Chapter One: Introduction**

*Me and my brother, we have been through a lot. We moved here when my dad got put in custody. I've been staying with my granny since I was in second grade. My neighborhood is like a bad neighborhood and it's a lot of ups and downs. Some people that cause trouble where I live, they are like, oh he's a good kid, we're going to pick on him to see what he's really about. So, I gotta stick up for myself and show them that I'm not the person to mess with.*

*-Theo*

.....

*My mom dropped out of college because she was expecting my sister. There were times when we didn't have a home so we had to live in the shelter and stuff. In my neighborhood I see kids that's my age and they are not at school because they are doing drug and stuff. At school I see other students not behaving and sometimes they pressure me to do things that aren't good.*

*-Brian*

Two students, from two different experiences, both struggle with various challenges that could impede their academic progress. Based upon their circumstances, some individuals would predict that their futures would result in either dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, or jail. Nevertheless, these two students are different. They have no intention of dropping out of school, becoming a parent before adulthood, or engaging in a life of crime. These two students are not only honor students; they are also student leaders at their schools and despite various challenges, they have made the choice to be exceptions.

This study explored the experiences of actual economically disadvantaged, African American students who encounter challenges within themselves, their family, school, and/or community, while managing to achieve academically during the middle school transition period. This study investigated how these students are overcoming the achievement gap that exists between African American and White students, accessing the

factors that make them academically successful, and how they are able to navigate their lives through various pressures.

### **Problem**

A pervasive problem that continues to present itself in society is the seemingly non-stop low-academic achievement of African American students. A great deal of research has revealed that, overall, African American students have consistently performed below the academic achievement of White students (Clark, 1983; Fordham, 1988; Ford & Harris, 1996; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kahlenberg, 2010). Although there have been many interpretations of the achievement gap, researchers Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) did not perceive the achievement gap as the difference in progress between African American and White students. Instead, Perry et al. contended the achievement gap, “should be thought of as the gap between the current performance of African American students and levels of excellence” (pp. 138-139).

The “criterion levels of excellence” that Perry et al. (2003) were referring to, consists of establishing the required performance level at “excellent” and changing the teaching and learning paradigm to reflect these goals for African American students (Hilliard & Sizemore, 1984; Perry et al., 2003; Wiggan, 2007; Wilson, 1990). Perry et al. believed “levels of excellence” should be evaluated upon standards that are “rigorous and fair” and based upon what students should know and be able to do as opposed to the “Black White achievement gap”(p.138). Perry et al. expound on this idea in the following quote:

The gap between the present level of performance for African American students and the criterion performance standards that should be required is the academic

achievement gap that should be closed. Too often, by using the White students' normative performance as the universal standards, not only do we use a low standard, but we tend to be satisfied with the performance of minority cultural groups when a substantial reduction in this gap occurs. (p. 138)

For 20 years, Whiting (2006) has critiqued solutions to close the achievement gap and has come to the understanding that the achievement gap will continue to grow unless more attention is given to developing more positive images of African American male students. Whiting (2006) believed that in order to close the achievement gap, African American males must embrace a scholar identity as early as possible. Research has also explored the growth of the achievement gap between African American boys and girls, in which African American boys continue to fall behind not only White students, but also African American girls (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Polite & Davis, 1999; Jordan & Cooper, 2003; Taylor & Graham, 2007). Rollock (2007) argued that this "within-group comparison" can often mislead individuals to believe that Black girls are excelling when "data show that they are, in fact, achieving well below their white female counterparts (who tend to achieve near the national average) and below the national average" (p. 197).

The 2009 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Analysis Report suggested that there have been considerable gains in academic achievement during the last 50 years for all students. In grades four and eight, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results demonstrate that reading scores have increased steadily since the early 1990s and mathematics scores were at their highest levels in 2007. Although reports have indicated that NAEP scores have increased for African American students, White students continue to out-perform African American students at

the national and state levels. In 2007, NAEP scores indicated that White students averaged at least 26 points higher than African American students in each subject, on a 0-500 point scale.

Research has documented various factors that have contributed to the achievement disparities, but it is equally important that more scholarly research explore the African American students who are defeating the odds and excelling academically (Howard, 2001, 2002; Wiggan, 2007). This study explored the lives of six, economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students experiencing school success. Through this work, the study offered insights for administrators, school counselors, teachers, parents, and communities on how these students have been successful.

### **Purpose**

The achievement gap between African American and White students continues to be a problem and a great deal of research has presented the plight of the African American student (Condrón & Roscigno, 2003; Entwistle & Alexander, 1994; Gamoran, 2001; Lynn & Vanhanene, 2002). However, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), argued that the normal functioning of human beings should not continue to be addressed with only negative references, as psychologists have learned that this approach does not move society closer to preventing serious problems. The most progress has resulted in building upon the competencies of individuals as opposed to focusing on correcting their weaknesses. Positive psychology explores the nature of individuals who function effectively and explains how they manage to live productive lives despite the difficulties life may bring (Sheldon & King, 2001). Through positive psychology, the focus shifts

“from a preoccupation with repairing weaknesses to the enhancement of positive qualities” (Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal, & Riley-Tillman, 2004, p. 101).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of six, economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students, who excelled academically at a predominantly minority public school in an impoverished community. The investigation of the six participants in this study aided in understanding how to close the achievement gap. Factors studied included the home, school, and community experiences that have influenced their academic achievement; this offered society a deeper understanding of how students are able to maintain high academic status in the midst of the obstacles that many economically disadvantaged, African American students encounter. This study gives a voice to students who have developed ways to overcome their obstacles and excel academically. Interviews were conducted through the phenomenological inquiry approach to investigate the participants’ lived experiences and how they make meaning of their academic achievement and the obstacles they encounter.

### **Significance**

This qualitative study was important and needed for several reasons. First, a gap exists in the literature where student experiences at the middle school level have not been explored. Research has revealed that the middle school transition is difficult for most students, but has proven to be more difficult for economically disadvantaged, African American students. Thus, it is important to study the experiences of African American students who are succeeding academically at this level to gain more insight into the factors that have contributed to their academic achievement.

The second goal of this study was to obtain the participants' perspectives of their success while they are experiencing it. This not only gave these students a voice, but also the researcher access to the mindset of middle school students, which provided a deeper understanding of the impact of their challenges and academic success.

Finally, the focus on qualitative findings allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of how academic success during the middle school transition is experienced by economically disadvantaged, African American students. The information gained from this study provides future researchers, school administrators, teachers, and parents with strategies to assist students with navigating through the challenges that many of these students encounter.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Research has revealed that the middle school transition can be difficult for economically disadvantaged, African American students (Fenzel, Magaletta, & Payrot, 1997; Gutman & Midgley, 2000). According to Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann (1997), "It is especially important to recognize meaning making processes during adolescence given the novel thought processes associated with that period, which provide a degree of recursive thinking unavailable at earlier periods of development" (p.818). The present study utilized the phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) to explore how six, middle school, African American students make meaning of their various experiences.

The processing of phenomena and experiences influence how valued one feels and it also gives meaning and significance to a person's abilities, physical attributes, behaviors, and activities (Spencer et al., 1997). The phenomenological variant of

ecological systems theory serves as a model to examine the normative developmental process of youth and links context and experience with the individual's experience, perception, and meaning making. This framework considers individuals' identity, lived cultural experiences, experience with racism, and meaning making. In doing so, it allows multiple levels of context to be studied, contributing to an understanding of experiences, perceptions, and coping with risk factors.

In the following quote, Swanson, Cunningham, and Spencer (2003) described Spencer's phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory:

How minority youth and community members view and comprehend family, peer, and societal expectations and their prospects for competence and success is central to understanding resilience and devising interventions that promote it and thus also revitalize communities. . . . it is a recursive model that describes identity development throughout the life course. In doing so, it allows one to capture and understand the meaning and underlying identity processes as linked to coping outcomes. (p. 611)

The phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory addresses how minority youth understand family, peer, and society expectations, and research has shown that family, peer, and society influences have an impact on the academic achievement of African American students (Ford, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mocombe, 2006). The phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory provided the researcher with a framework for studying the six participants' meaning making of the experiences that contribute to their academic achievement and the various challenges they have encountered. In addition, this theoretical framework allowed the researcher to pose

questions for the participants to reflect upon the identity processes that attribute to their academic success, which provided the researcher with information to connect participants' experiences to the factors that influence their academic achievement.

### **Research Questions**

The phenomenological theoretical framework supports the following research question guiding this study: What are the experiences of economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students who excel academically despite the circumstances that are generally associated with low achievement? This question was answered as the participants make meaning of their lived experience through the phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory.

While there was one central research question driving this study, there were other secondary research questions that contributed to the central focus. Research has shown that economically disadvantaged, African American students encounter various home, school, and community challenges that can impede their academic achievement (Rolf & Johnson, 1990; Gutman et al. 2002). Research also has shown that some economically disadvantaged, African American students are successful (Carter, 2006; Taylor & Graham, 2007; Herbert, 1993). The additional questions listed below were explored in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of these students' experiences and how they maintain academic achievement while navigating their home, school, and community experiences.

- What has contributed to these students' academic success?
- What challenges have these students experienced as African American, middle school students living in a low-income community?



- How do these students make meaning of their academic lives in the school setting?
- How do these students' home and community experiences impact their academic achievement?

Investigating the central question was the overarching objective of this study, while the secondary questions gave support to the central question by building an answer to the broader inquiry. The secondary questions broke down the central question into more detailed and specific questions that are connected to the purpose of this study. The interview questions are based upon the four secondary research questions and are created with respect to the theoretical framework and literature review research.

### **Construct Definitions**

This study focuses on economically disadvantaged, African American students because research reveals that the transition to middle school often is marked by decreased academic achievement and increased emotional stress (Burchinal, Roberts, Ziesel, & Rowley, 2008; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; Gutman & Midgley, 2000). In addition, African American students exposed to adversity may be especially vulnerable during this transition (Burchinal et al., 2008; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; Children's Defense Fund, 2010; Gutman & Midgley, 2000). The following construct definitions are provided in order to give context to this study and its findings:

**African American** - The Encyclopedia of Public Health (2002) defined the term African American as "a categorical descriptor that includes many different segments of

the American population referred to as ‘Black’ or Americans of sub-Saharan African ancestry” (para. 1).

**Economically Disadvantaged** - The participants’ eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunch establishes the economically disadvantaged criteria for this study. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), “Children whose gross family incomes are at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines are eligible for a free lunch and children in households receiving AFDC or food stamps are automatically eligible for a free lunch. Children whose gross family incomes are more than 130 percent but not more than 185 percent of the guidelines are eligible for a reduced-price lunch” (Appendix D 441).

**Middle school** –The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) defined middle level education as a period that serves early adolescent students, 10 to 15 years of age. The participants selected for this study were middle school students. Turning Points (2000) referred to this developmental stage of adolescence as the “turning point” between childhood and adulthood: a phase of life when many choices are made that will affect individuals’ health, education, and future endeavors. Adolescence, as a whole, is a stage at which students are not children or adults. Life becomes more complex as students find their own identity, encounter struggles with social interactions, and deal with moral issues (Erikson, 1959). Early adolescence, in particular, is a confusing and vulnerable time for students. In addition to the physical changes that early adolescents experience, there are social changes, issues dealing with sexuality, peers, and the quest for independence (Swanson, Cunningham & Spencer, 2003).

**Academic achievement** - The participants' academic achievement was determined by their Grade Point Average (GPA) and Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) results. Merriam-Webster (2010) defined Grade Point Average as the average obtained by dividing the total number of grade points earned by the total number of credits attempted. The Illinois State Board of Education (2007) defined the Illinois Standards Achievement Test as a measurement of individual student achievement relative to the Illinois Learning Standards. The results of this test give parents, teachers, and schools one measure of student learning and school performance.

### **Limitations**

An ethical issue that may have arisen during the course of this study was the possibility that the participants might feel uncomfortable when reflecting upon and discussing personal experiences that may be embarrassing or difficult to share. The participants and their parents or guardians were informed, before they agreed to engage in the study, that many of the questions being asked were personal and may reveal some sensitive issues. Although students were asked to reflect upon and discuss personal issues, they were told that these discussions would allow them to become aware of the things that have contributed to their academic success and the various challenges they have had to overcome in order to achieve this success. The researcher also shared that the knowledge gained from participants' experiences will benefit society by providing other economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students with practical strategies, which they can utilize in order to succeed academically in spite of their circumstances.

Another limitation that presented a concern was that the six participants the researcher selected for this study were not representative of all African American, middle-school students living in poverty; nevertheless, the researcher hoped that these participants were able to present a wide variety of experiences that cover a large spectrum of views, opinions, and behaviors, which will be additive to the literature in this area.

Finally, one additional potential limitation was that of researcher bias. Because the researcher was in a dual role as a researcher and an administrator in the school district in which the study was conducted, there could be challenges to maintaining objectivity during the data analysis phase of the study. However, by the researcher being employed at the elementary level and the participants selected for the study currently attending middle school, the researcher ensured that she did not have pre-conceived notions regarding the subjects under study.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

It was the 1980s, at the height of a crack epidemic that infiltrated communities throughout the United States; three African American boys grew up as friends in poor New Jersey neighborhoods that were infested with gang violence, drugs, and death. Living in single-parent homes, without stable father figures to provide a positive example, it was easy for them to look toward the hustlers and drug dealers for guidance. In the midst of their obstacles, one of the boys was inspired to become a dentist and encouraged his two friends to pursue the field of medicine. Together, these three boys made a pact to accomplish their goals and today, they are nationally known as The Three Doctors. Drs. Sampson Davis, George Jenkins, and Rameck Hunt defeated the odds by making the choice to become an exception to the roles in which society may have predicted they would play (Davis, Jenkins, & Hunt, 2002). Davis et al. (2002) chronicled their success stories in the book, *The Pact: Three Young Men make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream*.

This literature review presents research that explains how individuals like The Three Doctors are able to succeed, particularly during the middle school stage, which is one of the most difficult transitions in a student's academic experience. Although The Three Doctors were able to succeed academically, they continued to face challenges that could have discouraged them from progressing. In addition to coping with family structures, low socio-economic-status, and specific environmental pressures, the achievement gap that existed during the Three Doctors' middle school years was expanding.

In 2004, the achievement gap had increased in some cases, by as much as 50%, which was much larger than it was in 1988 (Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Although there have been gains since 2004, according to the 2010 Children's Defense Fund State of America's Children Report, 84% or more of African American fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students are reading below grade level. Eighty-five percent or more of African American students in these same grades are performing below grade level in the area of math. Thus, the first section of this literature review focuses on factors that contribute to the underachievement of economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students.

**Factors that Contribute to the Low-Academic Achievement of African American Middle School Students Who Are Economically Disadvantaged**

**Family Demographics, Race, and Culture**

Some research has revealed that the low-academic achievement of African American students begins with the educational level of the mother. When a child's mother has a low educational level, this issue often leads to minimal knowledge about the educational system and less interaction with the school. Both of these issues contribute to the lack of parental involvement, which negatively affects the child's level of achievement and dropout rate (Ford, 1996).

Other research has attributed the lack of academic success of some African American students to the break down in family structure. Many single parent families live in poverty and a vast percentage of these consist of African Americans (Educational Testing Service [ETS] Policy Information Report, 2007). Children, who are raised by a single parent, may have a disadvantage, when taking into account most single parent

families are headed by mothers and on average have employment that includes much lower incomes and fewer benefits than two parent households (ETS Policy Information Report, 2007). The 2010 Children's Defense Fund reported that 71% of African American babies are born to unmarried mothers and fewer than 40% of African American children live with two parents. According to this report, children of single mothers are four times more likely to be poor as children in married families.

At times, a child's academics are not the highest priority of parents living in poverty. Quite frequently, these parents are more concerned with meeting basic needs such as how to pay for food, shelter, etc. Although economically disadvantaged parents may have difficulty supporting their child's academic needs, this does not signify that these parents do not hold high expectations for their children's achievement (Ford, 1996). Nevertheless, the difference in income between single parent and two parent households "accounts for about half of the negative effects of parent absence on the many areas of child and youth well-being, including health, educational attainment and achievement, behavior problems, and psychological well-being" (McLanahan, 1997, p. 20).

Some theorists believe that the underachievement of African American students goes beyond the educational level of the mother and breakdown in family structure to the student's innate ability (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Lynn & Vanhanen, 2002). Although few will publicly express that African Americans are genetically inferior, there are many African American students who can share experiences when he or she was assumed to be an underachiever because of the color of their skin (Perry et al., 2003). One of the theories that proposes a hierarchy of intelligence, with Whites and Asians at the top, and African Americans at the bottom is the deficit-deprivation theory, which

suggests African Americans will always be academically inferior to Whites and Asians due to genetics (Thompson 2004).

There is also research that proposes differences in culture have a significant impact on school performance (Della-Dora, 1962). DeFilipps and Derby (1980) conducted a study of 50 African American, kindergarten aged children of welfare recipient parents. The purpose of the study was to identify children with learning disabilities at an early age and apply its predictive measures to a culturally disadvantaged population. The four measures that were utilized for predicting learning disabilities were Finger Localization, Letter Recognition, Developmental Test of Visual-Motor Integration, and Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. The students who participated in this study performed poorly on all of the measures except the Visual-Motor Integration. The results of this study revealed cultural factors have definite effects on predictive measures of reading disabilities. The test administrator indicated that many of the children needed extensive explanation of the testing instructions, which is associated with being raised in an “impoverished setting” that causes “unfamiliarity” with testing materials and negatively affects test performance (DeFilipps & Derby, 1980, p. 52).

Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) explored the academic achievement of Asian American students and compared them to the academic achievement of Whites, African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders and found Asians continue to be the highest achieving racial group in the United States. Asian students excel in school because of family culture. In Asian families, there is pressure from parents for children to work extremely hard in school, which is “the typical Asian story – a culturally transferable trait” (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003, p. 84). According to



this study, the average African American student who graduates from high school has only successfully completed the eighth grade. Although African American students may receive a high school diploma, they fail to demonstrate the skills that reflect 12 years of education (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

### **The Black Peer Group Influence**

Kunjufu (1988) disputed family demographics and innate ability as being major contributors to the academic challenges that low-income, African American students face. Kunjufu (1988) argued, “If teachers believe that scholastic problems are mainly caused by how many parents are in the home, how much money is in the home, and how many degrees parents possess, the solutions need to be husbands, jobs, and college tuition for parents’ education” (p. 68). Family income and the number of parents in the home are not major contributing factors to the underachievement of African American students, as there are many single, economically disadvantaged parents who dropped out of high school and still establish high expectations for their children and produce academically successful students (Kunjufu, 1988). However, Kunjufu (1988) did make a case for the influence of the black peer group on academic achievement, in which he believed the impact of peer pressure has reached “catastrophic proportions” and to succeed in school results in African American students “acting White,” being ridiculed, or called a “nerd” (p. vi).

For many African American students, the black peer group has taken on the role of family for various reasons and has allowed African American students to bond with peers who share the same issues and interests. Although African American students have a strong desire for group affiliation, this can have a negative influence on a student’s

academic achievement if the peer group opposes education (Ford, 1996). In *Bad Boys*, Ferguson (2004) discussed the influence of the black peer group and that friends often become family to those who share the same origin, conditions, and experiences. The inclusion of friends into family is not new to African Americans; it has been established since the time of slavery, when it was necessary to extend the family for maximizing limited resources and social power (Ferguson, 2004).

### **The “Acting White” Theory**

The “acting White” concept emerged as a result of the enslavement of Africans and their descendants in America. When involuntary minority groups are incorporated into a nation through conquest, slavery, or colonization, these groups tend to oppose the cultural values of the majority because they believe that conforming to any of the ways of the mainstream will force them to give up parts of their culture. Many times, school is viewed as a majority institution, which means that the academic achievement it upholds challenges the involuntary minority group’s loyalty to their ethnic identities (Ogbu, 1985).

The acting White theory is identified as behavior that many African American youths exhibit to avoid academic achievement because of a peer culture that connects academic achievement with a White domain (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Unfortunately, this theory creates a sense that academic achievement is racially inappropriate, which in turn allows these underachieving youths to attribute their failures to being loyal to their race (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Research and popular culture have been immersed in the discussion of the acting White concept for several years. However, recent literature has found that “high

achieving African American adolescents are not only failing to identify with acting White values, but more than likely have a better understanding of the irrelevance of the comparison for Blacks and in what seems to be the terms lack of meaning, even for Whites” (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001, p. 29). African American students have begun to connect high self-esteem and achievement goals with their identity.

African American students are able to “manage their academic success through various educational strategies, including camouflaging behaviors, all the while demonstrating that it is possible to construct a healthy racial identity in which academic achievement and aspirations neither compete or conflict, but rather complement, culturally constructed notions of what it means to be Black” (Horvat & Lewis, 2003, p. 11). In the present time, the acting White theory has become irrelevant in regard to providing effective solutions for closing the achievement gap (Toldson & Owens, 2010).

### **Dominant Society Standards**

Tatum (1992) challenged educators to question, “How did academic achievement get defined as exclusively white behavior? What in the curriculum reinforces or undermines this notion that academic excellence is an exclusively white domain?” (p. 332). When there are limited examples of African American accomplishment, stereotypes of inferiority infiltrates society and African American youth begin to refer to academic achievement and success as “acting White” (Tatum, 1992). Historically, during slavery and after emancipation, status problems emerged due to dominant society’s influence on African Americans. Before emancipation, “acting White” was not allowed and Whites defined the way African Americans behaved and talked. However, after emancipation, in order for African Americans to move up the ladder, it was imperative

that they conform to certain behaviors for formal education that were established by white people (Ogbu, 2004).

Mocombe (2006) believed that the achievement gap exists because African American students “are socialized in a sociolinguistic status group (i.e., the black underclass, which is a result of poverty wrought by the class structural differentiation of American capitalism), which fosters a deep linguistic structure that is different from the linguistic structure, which the dominant group in the society seeks to foster through education” (p. 398). Furthermore, there are times when, dominant society’s values convey a message to African American youth that they must aspire to the White, middle class norm and students who do not conform to these standards are represented as “militant,” “rebellious,” “surly”, and as having “attitude adjustment issues” (Duncan & McCoy, 2007, p. 41).

### **A Disconnect from Learning**

The devalued status and overarching presumption of inferiority that society holds regarding African American youth permeates the walls of academia, often limiting teachers’ support of and expectations of these students (Steele, 1992). Many low-achieving, African American students are disconnected from school and demonstrate behaviors that do not conform to dominant society’s values. Youth who become disengaged in learning fail to identify themselves as valued members of the learning community, which leads to a poorer sense of themselves and poorer academic performance.

The disconnect experienced by these students is often formed by low teacher expectations, academic tracking, punitive practices, and lack of teacher support (Talbert-

Johnson, 2004). Long, Monoi, Harper, Knoblauch, and Murphy (2007) reported that stereotypes that represent African American students in a negative manner can be threatening and diminish students' motivational beliefs. A student's awareness of various stereotypes can also produce anxiety that reduces their academic performance.

### **Middle School Adversity**

Piaget (1952) placed adolescents between ages 11 and 15 in a cognitive stage he called *formal operational thought*. During this stage, he believed that thought became more abstract, idealistic, and logical. Erikson's (1959) stage of identity vs. identity confusion is the fifth of the eight developmental stages in his life-cycle theory. During adolescence, world-views become important and the individual enters a psychological moratorium, which is a period of exploring different roles, values, and skills (Erikson, 1959). Although these cognitive developments occur during adolescence within all races, middle school can be a period that is particularly difficult for economically disadvantaged, African American youth, and students who fail to navigate through this transition may be in danger of various long-term negative outcomes (Finn, 1989).

Many economically disadvantaged, African American students are forced to deal with environmental and social pressures such as living in areas of concentrated poverty, besieged by joblessness, crime, violence, teen pregnancy, and drugs in addition to the biological, physical, and social transformations that accompany early adolescence (Wilson, 1990). The combination of these factors is often the cause for many of these youths to begin engaging in behaviors that are harmful to themselves or others (Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development, 1995; Fenzel et al., 1997). Furthermore, the impact of the middle school transition on the academic achievement of economically

disadvantaged, African American students is due to early adolescence that not only encompasses the biological and physiological changes associated with puberty, but also includes the social and learning environmental changes that characterize the transition from elementary to middle level schools (Gutman & Midgley, 2000).

During the middle school transition, various factors “place African American children at risk for less than optimal development” (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002, p. 368). These risk factors tend to be socio-emotional and cognitive problems, socio-economic-status, single parent homes, larger family sizes, family life stresses, and neighborhood influences. The more risks African American students experience, the less chance they have to be academically successful (Gutman et al., 2002).

Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, and Rowley (2008) conducted a study that examined the exposure to adversity to school competence during the middle school transition for African American children. Seventy-four African American children were followed from their first year to grades four to six. Interviews were conducted with parents, teachers completed questionnaires, and children were assessed annually in the summer following each grade. There were three major findings resulting from this study. The severity of exposure to social risk was related to lower reading, math, social skills, and more problem behaviors in grades four to six. Parenting served as a promotive factor for academic adjustment and was a mediator for behavior problems. However, the transition from elementary to middle school resulted in lower math scores and increased exposure to risk and external problems (Burchinal et al., 2008).

As discussed in this section of the literature review, family demographics, race, and culture are all factors that contribute to the low academic achievement of

economically disadvantaged, African American students. In addition, many low-income, African American students are disconnected from the learning environment due to the influences of dominant society and the pressures of the black peer group. Finally, during the middle school transition, low-income, African American students experience a great deal of adversity in addition to the developmental changes that occur during adolescence. Various environmental and social pressures that these students experience, such as living in economically disadvantaged communities that are consumed with unemployment and teen pregnancy, and infested with crime, violence, and drugs, have an enormous impact on their academic achievement. The next section of this literature review discusses the factors that contribute to the high academic achievement of low-income, African American students. These factors include cultural straddling, culturally relevant education, the value of education, academic resilience, self-efficacy beliefs, conative intelligence and the will to achieve, grit, religious beliefs and practices, support systems, and teacher expectations.

### **Factors that Contribute to the High-Academic Achievement of Economically Disadvantaged African American Middle School Students**

#### **Revisiting the Acting White Theory**

The five stages of Cross' (1991) nigrescence model recognize the “process of becoming Black” and three stages are presented in this literature review (Cross, 1991, p. 157). In the Encounter stage, the individual adopts the White perspective on life and race relations. The person has adjusted to the old worldview and identity resulting in resistance to change (Cross, 1991). In the following quote, Cross (1991) described the final two stages, Internalization and Internalization – Commitment:

The person is described as having shifted from the insecure and anxious moments of early conversion to confidence in personal standards of Blackness; from uncontrolled rage toward white people and a perception of them as a distinct and evil biologic group to controlled anger toward systems of oppression and injustice and racist institutions; from symbolic rhetoric to quiet, dedicated, long-term commitment; from unrealistic urgency to a sense of destiny; from anxious, insecure, rigid, inferiority feelings to Black pride, self-love, and a deep sense of Black communalism. (p. 159)

While the nigrescence model outlines the identity development of African Americans, Ogbu (2004) revisited the influence of the acting white theory on the academic achievement of African American students and its impact on these students' cultural identity in comparison to White culture. The strategies that contemporary Blacks adopt to balance meeting the demands of dominant society and the demands to conform to Black ways are similar to the coping strategies of Blacks after emancipation (Ogbu, 2004). In the following quote, Ogbu (2004) addressed the many critics that he believed misinterpreted the oppositional culture theory:

Suffice it to say that at school, students responded to required attitudes and behaviors labeled "White" like adult Blacks in White institutions and corporate America. It is important to bear in mind that although Black collective identity and cultural frame of reference are oppositional, only one of the five categories of Blacks among both adults and students is explicitly opposed to adopting White attitudes, behaviors and speech. In my own study, I have generally found that



there are relatively few students who reject good grades because it is “White.”  
(pp. 21-22)

Students are prevented from progressing academically when behaviors that are conducive to making good grades are rejected, such as speaking Standard English, completing homework daily, and taking challenging classes. The pressure from African American students develops when the black peer group discourages others from adopting academically successful types of attitudes and behaviors (Ogbu, 2004).

Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004) conducted a study of how African American students view themselves in terms of “acting Black.” The results of this study indicate that “acting Black” represents the African Americans who fail to perform academically or behave appropriately. These behaviors give them a higher claim to the title “acting Black” than the African Americans who demonstrate high academic achievement. This study consisted of interviewing 64, 16-17 year-old African American high school students (41 females and 23 males) representing 17 of the 22 public high schools in a large northeastern city.

The results of student responses to interview questions revealed primarily negative qualities associated with acting Black and were classified into five dimensions (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004). In the academic/scholastic dimension, students demonstrated the following behaviors: skipping class, not completing work, being street smart instead of school smart, and trying to impress friends. The aesthetic/stylistic dimension described students who walk with a stroll, sag their pants, wear braids in their hair, and listen to rap music. The use of non-standard speech, slang, and Ebonics were included in the behavior dimension. Students who demonstrated disrespectful behavior,

foul language, and a nonchalant attitude were grouped within the dispositional dimension. The impressionistic dimension included students who display wild and ill-mannered behaviors. The results of this study revealed that negative stereotyping could indeed have an impact on how African American youth identify with being Black. The quest to improve academic and social achievement among African American youths will need to focus on altering youths' definitions of acting Black (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004).

Harris (2006) conducted a study of 1,407 African American and White families from a county on the Eastern seaboard of the United States that challenged whether a student's experience from middle school to high school will lead to greater opposition toward schooling among African Americans than Whites. Socio-economic status varied and data were collected during the time the students entered middle school in the fall of 1991 until three years post high school graduation. Five aspects of African Americans' resistance to schooling were tested through the oppositional culture model.

In this study, hypothesis one examined if African American children perceive fewer returns to education and more limited opportunities for upward social mobility than White children (Harris, 2006). The results of this hypothesis indicated the educational attainment students would like to reach and the educational attainment they believe they will reach was greater for African Americans despite their socio-economic status; this belief remained the same over time (Harris, 2006). The results of hypothesis two, African American children have less favorable affect toward school than Whites, revealed that both groups experience similar rates of decline over time regarding school affect (Harris, 2006). Hypothesis three, African American children exhibit greater

resistance to school than Whites showed no support for African American students putting forth less effort to improve academically and both groups spent the same amount of time on school activities. Hypothesis four tested the acting White theory, which assumes high-achieving African American children are negatively sanctioned by their peers to a greater degree than high-achieving white children.

According to this study, only 17% of low-performing and high-performing African Americans believed excelling academically is “acting White.” Harris (2006) stated, “This suggests the fear of appearing White for performing well in school is not the reason for differences in school performance between these groups. The findings also showed students’ level of school performance is not related to their ability to make friends and Blacks find it easier to make friends than Whites at all levels of school performance” (pp. 816-817).

Finally, hypothesis five, the peer groups of African American children have a greater counter-educational culture than those of White children, revealed that African American students do not have peers who engage in more negative behaviors than Whites (Harris, 2006). The cultural straddler approach has been identified as one of the reasons many high-achieving, African American students are able to maneuver through dominant cultural capital.

Cultural straddlers are defined as “strategic navigators, ranging from students who ‘play the game’ and embrace the cultural codes of both school and home community to those who vocally criticize the schools’ ideology while still achieving well academically” (Carter, 2006, p. 308). Carter (2006) argued that these students:

value and embrace skills to participate in multiple cultural environments, including mainstream society, their school environments, and their respective ethnoracial communities. While straddlers share cultural practices and expression with other members of their social groups, they traverse the boundaries across groups and environments more successfully. (p. 306).

Carter (2006) conducted a study to reconceptualize how resistance to “acting White” is associated with academic outcomes for minority youth. This study utilized a mixed-methods approach in which survey and interview data collected from 68 low-income, African American and Latino male and female youths, from ages 13 to 20. The findings revealed two important insights. Students who were identified as cultural straddlers seemed to be best at balancing between their ethnic peer cultures and their school environments and students who were labeled as “acting White” varied in achievement levels and were determined based upon an individual’s tastes for White American, middle class speech, style of dress, music, and other art form interests (Carter, 2006). Furthermore, while cultural straddlers manage to successfully navigate through the challenges of home, school, and community, another approach that allows African American students to succeed academically while maintaining their culture is culturally relevant education.

### **Culturally Relevant Education**

Ladson-Billings (1995) conducted a study that revealed the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on African American student achievement. Five African American and three White teachers from a predominantly African American, low-income elementary school in California were selected to participate based upon parent criteria for

excellent teaching, principal and colleague recommendations, and student achievement as measured by standardized test scores. Each teacher participated in an interview, a videotaped classroom observation, and an analysis of his or her own and fellow participants' teaching practices. Students in the eight classrooms achieved success despite the low ranking of the school district and culturally relevant instruction helped students perform at higher levels than their district counterparts. Although these students performed lower than students in middle-class communities, more students in these classrooms scored at or above grade level on standardized achievement tests than classrooms that were not exposed to this type of instruction.

Delpit (2003) added another dimension to culturally relevant education, as she discussed high achievement being a traditional value of African heritage and exposing African American students to their intellectual legacy allows them to understand who they are, as well as their academic capabilities. Delpit (2003) stated, "In my rudimentary study of African history, I have learned that there were centers of higher education in Africa long before European penetration into the continent. From the major centers of higher education in Timbuktu and Mali, to the Sokoto Empire in Nigeria and the Congo, African peoples developed the earliest of advanced educational systems"(p. 19).

Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004) agreed that in order to increase the achievement levels of black youths, it is imperative that the acting Black theory is redefined by (a) teaching youths about the significant achievements of African Americans, (b) acquainting youths with African Americans who exemplify both positive racial identity and high achievement, and (c) emphasizing and reinforcing achievement as a cultural and historical obligation.

Thus, it is argued that school programs that effectively educate African-American students will be those programs that incorporate elements of effective multicultural education, such as those identified by Banks (2004). The primary goal of multicultural education, “is to reform the schools and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality” (Banks, 2004, p. 3). The five dimensions of multicultural education that entail content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure and opposes the “narrowly conceptualized” implementation of multicultural education that consists of activities for special holidays or an additional book by a minority author (Banks, 2004).

Culturally relevant pedagogy aids in making general education more successful for African American students. When cultural diversity is incorporated into the educational system academic success for all students is attainable. Curriculum is the way in which multiculturalism can break through the core of educational systems (Gay, 2004).

### **The Value of Education**

Through culturally relevant education, African American students begin to connect “acting Black” to their academic capabilities, which can be traced back to slavery. During slavery, literacy was freedom. The ability to read and write allowed slaves to feel good about themselves and aided in their struggle for independence. Although learning to read and write was an individual success, it was also a communal act. When one person obtained literacy, it was shared and passed on to others. Education had purpose and it was valued by all (Perry et al., 2003). One of the qualities of scholar identity includes a need for achievement. Whiting (2006) affirmed, “African American

males with a strong need for achievement understand that high academic achievement will take them further in life than being social and popular. In this sense, school and learning come first, guiding most of their decisions” (p. 225).

Taylor and Graham (2007) examined minority students’ educational value judgments and their perceptions of barriers. The participants were 615 African American and Latino boys and girls from second, fourth, and seventh grades. Each participant received a peer nomination booklet, in which they identified the students they admired, respected, or wanted to be like. The results of this study indicated that minority girls in all grades reported valuing average and high same-gender academic achievers. Boys, showed the same results at the elementary level, but seventh grade boys demonstrated decreased nominations for high achievers as valued.

This study also found that perceived barriers to opportunity increased for boys across grade levels and were connected to diminished achievement values for African American boys. According to Taylor and Graham (2007), the perceived barriers to opportunity are “to the extent that ethnic minority youth perceive that racial inequality poses limits on their social and economic mobility, they are less likely to believe that working hard in school will have long-term payoff” (p. 53). Although various barriers continue to exist for economically disadvantaged, African American students, academic resilience research investigates how students overcome this adversity.

### **Academic Resilience**

Herbert (1993) conducted a study that explored the resiliency of high achieving, African American males and examined why males in similar family and educational situations take alternative paths to achievement success. Several factors that

distinguished resilient and achieving gifted African American males from non-resilient and underachieving gifted African American males were discovered. Achievers had a strong sense of self. They were sensitive and compassionate. They also had aspirations and an inner will to achieve. The successful African American males were also nurtured by one or more adults, often including a teacher or family member. Their families were spiritual, optimistic, and provided opportunities for their sons to develop and maintain their abilities (Herbert, 1993).

On the other hand, underachieving males often became filled with despair and confusion and eventually lost sight of their goals (Herbert, 1993). Underachievers learned to dislike school and teachers who ignored their individual learning styles. They also faced social difficulties, such as problematic, complex family situations and negative peer environments (Herbert, 1993).

A resilient child is described as “doing reasonably well on the major developmental tasks important for children of that age and culture and the child has experienced extraordinary adversity”(Masten et al., 1999, p. 144). The emergence of resiliency literature has provided factors that protect students from the academic problems that are typically associated with poor minority students. Sampson (2002) investigated high-achieving, African American students’ responsibility in education and discovered that “they think that their futures are in their own hands, and they expect to do well. So, then, they are pointing toward a future, believe in their ability to get there and to do well, and believe that the execution of the task is up to them” (p. 191).

Anthony (2008) conducted a study of urban youth in grades six, seven, and eight living in three public housing developments in a western city. The study attempted to



explore the similarities and differences in risk and resilience trajectories by examining the participants' risk and protective factors. The risk and protective factors were investigated for individual characteristics, interpersonal and social characteristics, family conditions, micro-system transactions and the neighborhood, and educational and behavioral outcome measures. The analysis of risk and protective factors of these areas revealed four different cluster groups of students that represented the following four outcome measures: protected, high risk, coping, and disconnected. Each outcome measure included very different descriptions that ranged from high levels of coping and self-esteem to high levels of delinquency and low achievement. The findings of this study suggested that various assessments and interventions are necessary to assist youths that grow up in urban poverty and ignoring their basic physical and social needs makes it difficult to implement effective interventions to increase achievement (Anthony, 2008).

In the following quote, Elias and Haynes (2008) agreed that for economically disadvantaged, African American students placed at risk, social-emotional competence is salient for academic achievement:

The mechanisms by which these skills foster resiliency are linked to interpersonal processes in classrooms. Children's ability to regulate their emotions when frustrated, puzzled, or dejected, or beset with pervasive feelings of hopelessness or anger clearly will affect the energy they can devote to learning, even when presented with rigorous and empirically supported academic curricula. Thus, possessing social-emotional skills with fluency will allow students to better focus on academic tasks despite bringing into school the many interpersonal difficulties they may be experiencing outside as well as inside the building. (p.476)

## **Self-efficacy Beliefs**

One of the qualities that resilient students possess is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the strength of an individual's belief in their own ability that likely affects whether they will attempt to cope with various situations. Self-efficacy determines the amount of effort a person will put forth, and the extent of their perseverance in the midst of obstacles and various challenging experiences (Bandura, 1977).

Jordan (1981) conducted a study to address the contributions of global self-concept, academic self-concept, and need for academic competence in the academic achievement of inner-city African American students. In this study, 328 eighth grade, African American students with low socio-economic status from a New York City public school were selected to participate. The results of this study suggested that global self-concept, an overall general view of self did not substantially reflect in academic achievement. Academic self-concept, when an individual believes he or she is capable of success and the academic success is influential in sustaining competence resulted in statistical significance for both girls and boys in academic achievement. Lastly, the need for academic competence, which gives students the belief that they are able to perform well, accounted for significant proportions of unique variance in academic achievement. Overall, this study recommended that interventions for raising the achievement of African American students should focus on enhancing academic self-concept and need for academic achievement (Jordan, 1981).

Academic self-efficacy is defined as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances"(Bandura, 1986, p.391). Gutman and Midgley (2000) conducted a study of

62 African American families living in poverty and found academic self-efficacy to be most important when determining factors that contribute to the academic achievement of poor and minority youth during the middle school transition. The results of this study indicated that poor, African American students with a greater sense of self-confidence in their ability to master academic tasks might not experience the magnitude of decline in academic achievement typically associated with the middle school transition (Gutman & Midgley, 2000).

Self-efficacy and academic self-confidence are two of the nine qualities that represent scholar identity (Whiting, 2006). Students that possess self-efficacy believe they are competent and can achieve. In addition to the other eight qualities of scholar identity, self-efficacy has a major influence on student performance in school; it is the core of scholar identity and provides the basis for the other qualities (Whiting, 2006). Academic self-confidence also plays a significant role in student achievement (Whiting, 2006). When African American males have self-confidence, they believe they are intelligent and capable of doing well in school. They enjoy learning and do not feel inferior in academic environments (Whiting, 2006). Besides academic self-confidence, the factor of the will to achieve may be an important variable in self-efficacy.

### **Conative Intelligence and the Will to Achieve**

Kolbe (1990) believed the will to achieve is more important than a person's IQ or their desire to achieve and argued that an individual's achievement entails more than what he or she knows or wishes they could do. There are also things that a person will choose to do and not to do. Kolbe (1990) insisted there is no outcome without conation,

only potential and through conation, an individual experiences the process of achieving their goal. Conation is the ability to get things done; according to Kolbe:

Each individual has his or her own destiny – a unique nature that persists through all life’s struggles – and that, if we are free to act on our instinctive talents, every one of us will not only overcome obstacles but also achieve distinction and fulfill our sense of purpose. (Kolbe, 1990, p. xvi)

Conation or the will to achieve is a student’s internal drive to learn for the purpose of learning. Students must first “possess the will to learn; then they must make an effort and apply their energies to learning tasks” (Riggs & Gholar, 2009, p. 6). Riggs and Gholar (2009) believed conative intelligence allows a student to adopt the will to succeed in school and a student’s will has an even greater impact on whether he or she is academically successful. Students must have the will to learn and put forth effort because no other person has the authority to make them learn. Riggs and Gholar (2009) stated:

The will is the place where we discover the strength of what we really want to achieve. If your internal desire to achieve a goal is strong enough for you to take serious action...then the will quickly becomes your agent of change working with you from within, enabling you to move forward or to even become unstoppable in your endeavor to achieve your goal. (p. 150)

One aspect of a student’s will to achieve is their grit and goal achievement.

### **Grit and Goal Achievement**

Grit is defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. It entails “working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years

despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007, p. 1087). In the following quote, Duckworth et al. (2007) explained the impact of grit, perseverance, and long-term goals on achievement:

The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course. Our hypothesis that grit is essential to high achievement evolved during interviews with professionals in investment banking, painting, journalism, academia, medicine, and law. Asked what quality distinguishes star performers in their respective fields, these individuals cited grit or a close synonym as often as talent. (pp. 1087-1088)

Grit is a personal quality that most leaders share, which consists of the individual not only finishing the task, but pursuing a given aim over years (Duckworth et al., 2007). As Duckworth et al. (2007) explained, the importance of an individual’s passion for working toward a goal to obtain achievement, conative intelligence produces “ the ability to persist, pursue, strive and commit to a goal; understand the role of persistence in high performance; and productively engage the energy of the will in active teaching and learning” (Riggs & Gholar, 2009, p. 15).

Tough (2011) reported in the *New York Times* that two of the most competitive schools in New York, Riverdale Country School and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Charter School explored the impact of grit on their students. The concern at Riverdale Country School was that the standardized tests that are required for admission into the school only measures a students’ Intelligence Quotient (I.Q.) and not long-term

success. At KIPP, a school where most students are minority and economically disadvantaged, the school ranked fifth highest on the eighth grade achievement test in 1999, but only 33% of these students went on to graduate from a four-year college. Duckworth et al. (2007) administered the Grit Scale test at both schools, which required students to rate themselves on 12 simple questions. Duckworth et al. found that at both schools, I.Q. was a better predictor of scores on standardized tests, but the Grit Scale was a more reliable indicator of report card grades.

According to Tough (2011) Duckworth also implemented the Grit Scale to 1,200 freshman at West Point. Although West Point administered its own evaluation of the cadets at the same time, the Grit Scale turned out to be the more accurate predictor of which cadets completed the program and which cadets dropped out (Tough, 2011). Although grit is an important element in achieving success, other aspects that influence the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged, African American students may include their religious beliefs and practices.

### **Religious Beliefs and Practices**

Williams, Davis, Cribbs, Saunders, and Williams (2002) conducted a study that examined the relationship between academic performance and a number of contextual factors for African American freshman in an urban setting. The results of this study indicated that gender, church attendance, and percentage of relatives completing high school were significant in predicting positive academic outcomes. The church attendance of relatives was highly connected to a student's intention to complete school. Peers' church attendance was highly connected to a student's grade point average and amount of suspension. However, personal religiosity was not significant in this study and may be

due to the stronger influence of family and peers' religious beliefs on a student's academic outcomes than personal religious beliefs. This study revealed that a student's expectation of their peers' completion of the school year highly affects their intention to complete school and having relatives who have graduated high school is significantly related to a student's number of suspensions and grade point average. It was also determined that females have a higher chance of completing school, lower amount of suspensions, and more friends who attend church (Williams et al., 2002).

Other research has suggested that a student's religious beliefs and practices have an enormous impact on academic achievement. Akom (2003) challenged the theories of "acting White" and "involuntary minorities" by demonstrating that young female members of the Nation of Islam (NOI) develop a black achievement ideology through the religious tenets and practices of the NOI. This study consisted of seven eleventh grade, high-achieving, female participants from low-income families in which no parent had an advanced degree. The results of this study revealed that the NOI encouraged these students to adopt the kind of studious orientation to school that is usually demonstrated by voluntary immigrant groups (Akom, 2003). The NOI instilled in these students a positive perspective of being Black as they were exposed to their history, provided a support system that encouraged students to take responsibility for their own success, and "inverted the racial code that equates acting white with school success and instead equates the notion with historical, psychological, institutional, and subjective levels of oppression" (Akom, 2003, p. 314).

The NOI associates the "acting White" theory with negative attitudes and behaviors toward African Americans. This theory does not identify being Black with

academic achievement and by “changing a community’s interpretation of both itself and its history and redefining morality and acceptable social behavior, the NOI has been able to systematically create an organizational habitus that encourages achievement for its members, resulting in the transformation of the burden of acting White into the honor of being Black” (Akom, 2003, p. 313). Besides the role of religion, other research on support systems have explored why some African American students succeed academically and others do not.

### **Support Systems**

Prom-Jackson, Johnson, and Wallace (1987) support Kunjufu’s (1988) argument for less research on family structure and socio-economic-status and more research on African American parents’ values and beliefs. Prom-Jackson et al. (1987) found that the low-income, gifted, minority students had parents of all educational levels; therefore, parental educational level was not a strong predictor of minority students’ academic performance. Living in single-parent families did not negate the development of academic excellence and success. Surprisingly, single-parent families had slightly higher achievement scores than students in two-parent families. As a result of this study, it was concluded that in spite of socio-economic-status and parental educational level, the parents of high-achieving, African American students often had high aspirations for and high expectations of their children and encouraged them to pursue high levels of education and challenging careers.

Sampson (2002) analyzed the way some African American students do well in school and others with the same socio-economic status, neighborhood, and in one case, the same school do poorly. When researching how African Americans who grew up poor



but became successful, Sampson found there was a huge amount of discipline, structure, and order in their households. Parents expected their children to succeed and instilled a high sense of self-confidence. Failure was not an option in these families (Sampson, 2002).

The Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) is an organization that provides support to high-achieving, minority students, particularly African Americans who understand the pitfalls of the achievement gap. MSAN attempts to close the achievement gap with the philosophy of promoting scholar identity during annual conferences conducted by top university scholars in the area of minority achievement. The conference attempts to answer the question, “Why do some African American and Latino students thrive while others – even those from well-educated, middle-class families – underachieve relative to their White and Asian American peers” (Sadowski, 2005, p. 1)?

Sadowski (2005) reported that the most reoccurring theme that is revealed at MSAN conferences is that students feel academic achievement is often determined by the supportive relationships adults have established with students. Many of these students indicated parents as their greatest source of academic motivation. Besides drawing support from families, economically disadvantaged, African American students may also receive support from teachers who influence their academic achievement (Sadowski, 2005).

### **Teacher Expectations**

There are many African American students who do not have the ideal support systems at home and, many times, it becomes the responsibility of educators to establish

environments in which teachers recognize and nurture the ambitions of children of color and assist them in dealing with the challenges they encounter in their journey to achieving those ambitions (Steel, 1992). Tyler and Boelter (2008) conducted a study to determine whether there was a significant relationship between perceived teacher expectations and the academic performance of their students. There were 262 predominantly African American, low-income, middle school students selected for this study.

Students were asked to respond to a packet containing a demographic sheet, the Expectations Student Achievement Related Practices scale (ESA), which reflected practices implemented by teachers who hold high expectations of students, the Academic Engagement scales, and the Academic Efficacy scale (Tyler & Boelter, 2008). The results of this study indicated teacher expectations emerged as significant predictors of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. In particular, students in eighth grade had significantly lower perceptions of their teachers' expectations than sixth and seventh graders. Overall, middle school students' perceptions of their teachers' expectations were associated with a moderate level of cognitive engagement and high levels of behavioral and emotional engagement and academic efficacy (Tyler & Boelter, 2008).

As discussed in this section of the literature review, culturally relevant education, valuing education, academic resilience, self-efficacy beliefs, conative intelligence, grit and goal achievement, religious beliefs and practices, strong support systems, and teacher expectations all contribute to the high academic achievement of economically disadvantaged, African American students. In addition, when African American students adopt the cultural straddler approach they are able to balance the expectation of “acting

Black” while conforming to dominant society demands, which has caused some researchers to revisit the “Acting white” theory and its impact on the academic achievement of African American students.

### **Literature Review Summary**

This literature review explored research that relates to factors that contribute to the academic performance of economically disadvantaged, African American students and some of the key issues presented in this literature review focus on the various challenges that often impede the academic achievement of these students during their middle school transition.

The literature reveals that as African Americans, students often are disconnected from the classroom and fail to identify themselves with the learning community due to the influence of the black peer group, “acting White” theory, and dominant society. In such situations, achievement is generally low. However, Ogbu (2004) revisited the “acting White” theory to clarify that few African American students are unsuccessful in school due to the idea that education is a White domain. In addition, Harris (2006) revealed that a tiny percentage of African American students actually believe that the “acting White” theory and the influence of the black peer group have a major impact on their academic achievement.

The influence of socio-economic-status on the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged, African American students is presented in the review of literature as often being connected to the breakdown in family structure and environment. However, this is not always the case, as was revealed in the study by Prom-Jackson et al.

(1987) in which living in a single-parent household was found not to have a significant influence on African American students' academic achievement.

The literature also exposes that the adversity during the middle school transition often increases for economically disadvantaged, African American students. The middle school transition poses challenges for all students based upon the developmental, physiological, social and learning environmental changes that occur. However, this period becomes more difficult for economically disadvantaged, African American students who might experience more exposure to crime, violence, drugs, and teenage pregnancy, all of which could negatively affect these students' life choices and have a major impact on their academic achievement.

Opposing positions and theories are presented in the literature review to highlight the factors that contribute to the low academic achievement of economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students. Nevertheless, the review of literature also explored various factors that contribute to the high academic achievement of these students. Culturally relevant education, self-efficacy, support systems, teacher expectations, resilience, the value of education, cultural straddling, religious beliefs, grit, and the inner will to achieve are reflected in the literature as factors that contribute to the high performance of economically disadvantaged, African American students.

The experiences of the six participants will be explored in the present study to not only identify how they navigate through the various challenges that are presented in the literature while maintaining high academic achievement, but also extend the research by exploring these students' experiences to determine which factors that were presented in the literature have the greatest impact. A clear understanding of the factors that influence

the performance of African American, middle school students is necessary if there can be any realistic effort to enhance the academic achievement and performance of these students. Listening to the voices and observing the behaviors within the lived experience of the six participants as they share their challenges and accomplishments during this stage in their life will assist in providing stronger foundations for other economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students. The next section explains the theoretical framework that is utilized as a lens to discover the experiences of the six participants in this study.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

Qualitative research is an investigative process in which the researcher analyzes a social phenomenon by contrasting, comparing, replicating, cataloguing and classifying the object of study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative research paints a picture of experiences, feelings, and emotions that relate to a certain phenomenon or situation. It is an important tool for understanding a particular social situation, event, role, group or interaction (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000). Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggested that qualitative research allows the researcher to enter the participant's world through ongoing interaction to uncover the participant's perspectives and meanings. Miles and Huberman (1994) described the importance of gathering qualitative data in the following statement:

With qualitative data one can...see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations. Then, too, good qualitative data are more likely to lead to serendipitous findings and to new integrations; they help researchers to get beyond initial conceptual frameworks. Finally, the findings from qualitative studies have a quality of undeniability. (p. 1)

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences that are common to African American, middle school students who are academically successful despite being economically disadvantaged. This study added to the existing knowledge base on African American, middle school students by exploring how the participants make meaning of the impact that their home, school, and community experiences have on their academic success and the challenges they have had to overcome while maintaining high academic achievement.

A phenomenological inquiry approach was applied in this study to investigate the lived experiences of the participants and identify the factors that contribute to their academic achievements in spite of the various challenges they encounter.

Phenomenological researchers seek to understand what an experience means for those who have lived it and are able to share an explicit description of the experience. Through dialogue and reflection, an underlying meaning of a shared experience can be revealed (Schram, 2003). The ultimate goal of a phenomenological researcher is to convey a meaning that is essential to the participants' experience (Schram, 2003). This study revealed how high achieving, African American middle school students who are economically disadvantaged make meaning of their experiences and the factors that contribute to their academic success.

### **The Role and Background of the Researcher**

I am an African American female who grew up in a two-parent, middle class household located in one of the largest cities in the United States. As an only child, I was provided many opportunities that range from private school education in grades kindergarten through twelve to lessons in piano, dance, swim, and tennis. Growing up in my household, the expectation was that I was successful in school and although my parents ensured that I had the necessary resources to meet this expectation, I often wonder if I would have accomplished this goal in a different environment. Because of this, I am intrigued by the economically disadvantaged, African American students who have defeated the odds by excelling academically; this is one of the reasons I am interested in exploring their experiences.

My perceptions of the impact of the middle school transition on economically disadvantaged, African American students have been shaped by my personal experiences. From August 2001 to August 2008, I served as a Dean of Students and assistant principal at various middle schools and from the beginning of my administrative career to present, I have worked closely with economically disadvantaged, African American students. I believe these experiences enhance my awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to many of the challenges these students encounter. Nevertheless, due to previous experiences of working with this population of students, I brought a bias to this study. Although every effort was made to ensure objectivity, I entered this study with the perspective that many students who come from low-income households are provided fewer resources and opportunities and are forced to work harder at being academically successful than those who are from middle class families.

This study was conducted at a middle school in the school district where I am currently an elementary school principal. I chose this site due to its high percentage of economically disadvantaged, African American students. In order to gain entry to the setting, I submitted a letter to the Superintendent explaining the purpose of the study and outlining what the study would require of the school site, participants, and parents. Immediately following, the Superintendent and district attorney met with me to discuss detailed information regarding the study. During the meeting, the Superintendent explained that my participation in this project would be approached as an outside researcher as opposed to a district employee. On Wednesday, February 1, 2012, my study was presented and approved at the Board of School Inspectors meeting (Volume 54 – Report No. 130).



## Setting

The setting for this study was in a school system in the Midwestern region of the United States. The school district was located in a small city that is 40 miles southwest of a major city. The city in which this study was conducted is the fastest growing city in the state and one of the fastest growing in the United States. For most of its existence, the city has had its “west side” and “east side,” referring to areas west or east of a river that runs through the city. Although both sides of the city were proportionate throughout most of history, during the 1950s many businesses moved from the downtown area that is located between the “west side” and “east side” and relocated to the west side where strip malls and shopping centers began to emerge.

As the city continued to expand, the school district grew to 23 schools: 13 elementary schools serving students in grades Pre-K through five; four junior high schools serving students in grades six through eight; four magnet schools; one early childhood center; and one alternative school serving students in elementary and junior high. The school district serves approximately 11,074 students. In total, 48% of the student population is Latino; 29% is African American; 16% is White; and 7% is Other. Seventy-five percent of students within the district qualify to receive free or reduced price meals at school.

The school in which this study was conducted is one of the junior high schools that serve students in grades six through eight. The school’s population consisted of approximately 734 students. The demographic of the student body is comprised of the following: 45% African American; 33.4% Latino; 15.9% White; 5.2% Multi-Race, 0.4%

Asian; and 0.1% American Indian. Seventy-three percent of the student population received free or reduced price meals at this school at the time of the study.

The school is located on the “east side” of the city where drug and gang violence is rampant throughout the community. All students in grades six through eight who live within the boundaries attend this neighborhood school. Although the school has demonstrated academic gains each year, the school has not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in over five years. There were 46 teachers in the school and the average class size was 25 students. In addition to core classes, students participated in physical education, health, and fine arts throughout the year.

This school, in particular, is the only school in the district that houses a school-within-a school. The school-within-a school is a school of choice in which students throughout the district in grades six through eight apply for admittance and are accepted, based upon various academic criteria. The school-within-a school, although housed in the same building, is separate from the neighborhood school in that it is a magnet school and students must maintain good academic standing and positive behavior or risk being dismissed from the program.

### **Selection of Participants**

Six, male and female, African American students in grades seven and eight were selected to participate in this study. The researcher chose to select seventh and eighth grade students because students in these grade levels are developmentally more mature to handle the abstract concepts that were presented, as their ages likely range from 11 to 14 years and their experiences allow them to be more familiar with these concepts. It was

also important to receive a broad view of the experiences of African American students; therefore, male and female students were explored in this study.

The first criteria for selection were the participants' ethnicity, gender, and income-status, which were accessed through the district's computer-based Student Information System K12 (SISK12) to determine if the participants identified as both African American and receive free or reduced meals. The second criterion for selection was the participants' performance on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). The seventh grade participants must have met or exceeded state standards for the previous year in the areas of reading and mathematics and eighth grade participants must have met or exceeded state standards for the past two years in the areas of reading or mathematics. The third criterion for selection was that seventh grade participants must have maintained a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 or above for the current school year and the previous year while eighth grade participants must have maintained a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 or above for the current school year and two previous years.

Before the selection process began, the researcher provided school administration with the aforementioned criteria to select students in grades seven and eight to send a parent letter and consent form from the school district that informed the students' parents/guardians of the purpose of the study, criteria for selection of participants, and how the study would be conducted. Once the researcher received the signed district consent forms, the selection process began for those students, as teachers were asked to identify the ideal five males and five females whose verbal skills would allow them to effectively communicate their feelings and experiences. The researcher then utilized the

process of random selection to choose three male and three female students to participate in the study. The names of all male students were placed into one basket and the names of all female students were placed into another basket. The three male students and three female students randomly identified were selected to participate in the study contingent upon parental/guardian consent and the willingness to commit without any immediate reward for participation. If selected students were unable or unwilling to participate, the remaining students, identified by the teachers, were randomly selected with the same drawing process until three male and three female students were discovered. The parents/guardians of the students who became participants in the study were required to review and sign a consent form indicating he or she understood how the study was to be conducted, the purpose, benefits, and risks of the study, and that his or her child was allowed to participate in the study (see Appendix A-1). All students who became participants in the study were required to review and sign an assent form indicating that he or she understood how the study would be conducted, the purpose, benefits, and risks of the study, and that he or she was willing to participate (see Appendix A-2).

## **Method**

The method utilized to gather information was comprised of three open-ended interviews (see Appendix B). The purpose of all interviews was to identify the experiences that have contributed to the participants' academic success. During each interview, the participants were asked to reflect upon their experiences; these reflections allowed the researcher to determine deeper meanings or themes. In the following statement, Patton (1990) described the significance of data collected through interviews:

The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. (p. 278)

The interviews occurred in three phases. The questions asked during the first phase of interviews focused on the factors that have contributed to the participants' academic success and the challenges they have experienced. The second phase of interviews addressed how the participants make meaning of their academic lives in the school setting and how their home and community experiences influence their academic achievement. The third and final phase of interviews provided the participants with reflection time and allowed the researcher to ask additional questions for clarification. In addition, during this final interview phase, participants were given an opportunity to review the transcription of previous interviews to ensure the transcript accurately depicts their comments. Through member checking, each participant was allowed to make corrections to the transcript to more accurately reflect what he or she meant to convey during interviews.

Three interviews were conducted with each participant during school hours in an office at the participants' school. Each interview was audio taped to ensure the information gathered was documented correctly. The use of the tape recorder allowed the researcher to listen carefully to the participants' responses during the interviews while actively keeping them engaged in the interview process. Anecdotal notes were written on comments that may have caused the researcher to probe participants for more answers. Anecdotal notes included facial and body expressions that indicated more importance to a particular comment or changes in the participants' emotions during a particular response.

All interviews were kept confidential, with the use of pseudonyms for all participants and identifying names in the study. All research records were stored securely, and only the researcher had access to the records. The researcher maintained the audio tapes of each interview in a locked cabinet until the study was complete. After the study was completed, the audio tapes were sent to a professional service to be destroyed and the researcher received a certificate indicating the data had been destroyed.

### **Data Coding and Analysis**

Using a phenomenological analysis, the researcher explored data obtained from semi-structured interviews with six student participants. The goal of the study was to identify the experiences and perceived meaning of these disadvantaged, but academically successful youth and the associated factors that have contributed or hindered the success of these students. Thus, the seven step modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994) was employed to analyze the data obtained from the six student participants.

The modified van Kaam analysis process, as outlined by Moustakas (1994), included steps of listing and preliminary grouping of participant responses, reduction and elimination of the responses to form invariant constituents (key responses of participants related to the research topic), clustering and thematizing of the invariant constituents, finalization of the relevant invariant constituents and themes, creation of individual textural and structural descriptions, and the generation of the final composite descriptions that served as the conclusions of the analysis in representing the perceptions and experiences of the group as a whole (Mousakas, 1994).

The first four steps of the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) were used to reveal the invariant constituents and thematic categories in the data. According to

Moustakas (1994), the invariant constituents represent the experiences and perceptions of the participants related to the topic under investigation. The analysis process of this study was assisted by the use of the NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software, which was used to code the transcribed text of the interviews, note the location and frequency of each invariant constituent, group the invariant constituents into categories, and generate frequencies of the occurrence of invariant constituents.

The analysis followed the seven step modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994). As such, the first step entailed a subjective process wherein the researcher evaluated the relevance of the participant statements to the research topic. In this step, the process employs *horizontalization*, a process of listing and grouping relevant responses made by the study participants. During this step, the researcher used NVivo10® qualitative analysis software to assist in the data management during the coding of the invariant constituents (relevant statements) within the interview text, allowing the researcher to easily note the location and frequency of each occurrence.

Following the listing and grouping process, the next step of the data analysis was the reduction and elimination of the coded invariant constituents of the previous step (Moustakas, 1994). As such, this step involved a re-evaluation of each coded invariant constituent in terms of relevance to the phenomenon under investigation and the specific research questions of the study. This step also included evaluation of each invariant constituent against the other invariant constituents in order to identify and prevent overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions (Moustakas, 1994).

The third step in the process included the clustering and thematizing of the invariant constituents into thematic categories (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, the

invariant constituents that were identified as being related to each other were grouped together into thematic categories. These categories represent a common theme in the group of data. The thematic categories, which emerge from the analysis, reflect the common experiences and perceptions of the study participants. For this step, Nvivo software was used as an organizational tool, offering a workspace capable of categorizing the data and grouping the invariant constituents into appropriate categories. In addition, the program was able to track the frequency of each of the invariant constituents across participants within the thematic categories.

As the fourth step of the modified van Kaam process (Moustakas, 1994), the invariant constituents and thematic categories were validated. This was accomplished by evaluating whether the invariant constituents were demonstrated to be either explicitly expressed in the transcription or definable as compatible (valid). According to Moustakas (1994), compatible constituents clearly indicate a reference to an explicit invariant constituent.

The last three steps in the process generate the individual and composite descriptions for the analysis. The individual textural descriptions of the participants' experiences were developed as the fifth step in the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994). Nvivo software was also used during this step, providing easy access and documentation of the location of textual examples for specific, common invariant constituents among the different participants. Following the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994), *Imaginative variation* was employed for each description (sixth step) in order to more clearly express the relevant experiences of the participants. The seventh and final step in the process was the generation of composite textural-structural



descriptions, which are presented as overarching themes that run across the data and are, therefore, used to present the experiences of the group of participants as a whole. These themes (composite descriptions) represent the conclusions of the analysis and are used to address the research questions of the study.

### **Methodology Summary**

This qualitative study utilized the phenomenological inquiry approach to explore the experiences of the students selected to participate in this study. Six African American, economically disadvantaged students in grades seven and eight were randomly selected for participation, based upon their Illinois Standards Achievement Test results and grade point average. The participants took part in three interviews in which the researcher asked open-ended questions that allowed them to share the stories of their experiences. Each interview was audio taped and transcripts were coded and analyzed for reoccurring themes. Although this study presents some limitations, the findings provide educators with a deeper understanding of the skills the participants have acquired to overcome their challenges and the factors that contribute to their academic success.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research was to explore experiences of six, economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students who excel academically at a predominantly minority public school in an impoverished community. Through the exploration of the experiences of six student participants, the study findings will provide a deeper understanding of the experiences that shape their education, including home, school, and community experiences, how they were able to persist in their academic success, and how society might work toward closing the achievement gap for disadvantaged, African American students. The participants were selected because of their academic success and school enrollment.

Data were obtained for the study through semi-structured interviews with six student participants. These students attended a public school in an impoverished area where most of the students were Latino and African American. The students were selected to participate in the study because of their demonstrated academic success. Data analysis was conducted using the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994) to explore their perceptions, experiences, and challenges to achieving academic success. This chapter details the data collection and analysis method used and the associated findings from the research.

Findings are presented according to the thematic categories revealed from the data and relevant to the research questions. Following the modified van Kaam procedure, individual textural-structural descriptions are given for each participant, which lead into the concluding structural composite descriptions, which express the perceptions of

participants as a group with regard to phenomenon. The chapter concludes with a summary.

### **Research Questions**

The phenomenological research design was used to explore the following research question: What are the experiences of economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students who excel academically despite the circumstances that are generally associated with low achievement? In addressing this primary research question, the following sub-questions were explored:

- What has contributed to these students' academic success?
- What challenges have these students experienced as African American, middle school students living in a low-income community?
- How do these students make meaning of their academic lives in the school setting?
- How do these students' home and community experiences impact their academic achievement?

### **Findings**

The findings reveal how participants responded to the associated interview questions, highlighting the supporting and challenging experiences that have influenced the participants' academic successes. In responding to the interview questions, the participants revealed their perceptions and experiences and the factors that contributed to their educational success. The data analysis process, as described in Chapter Three, generated key invariant constituents, which were separated into the following thematic categories (see Table 1). The findings are presented according to these thematic

categories and include textual data from actual participant responses to support each theme. Participant names are given as pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Table 1

*Thematic Categories and Invariant Constituent Distribution for Interviews*

Thematic Categories	# Invariant Constituents
Student Self-Description as High Achievers	6
Reasons for Academic Success	14
Goals for Future	11
Assistance and Role Models	17
Family and Home Influences	
Family contribution to success	9
Challenges to school achievement related to family.	10
Factors related to everyday home life	9
Peer Influences	
Friendships	15
Other peers	16
Racial conflicts	2
Academy program	6
School and Teacher Influences	13
After-school and Extra-curricular Activities	8
Neighborhood and Community Influence	15

**Student Self-Description as High Achievers**

The first thematic category was related to the participants' self-descriptions as students. All six participants described receiving As and Bs (mostly As) and described themselves as high achievers. According to participants, being a high achiever meant trying their hardest, handing in quality work that reflects the best of their ability, and expecting more of themselves. Aligning with this notion, the participants also described themselves as academically determined (i.e., working hard to complete all the work in a quality fashion and staying focused), staying out of trouble, maintaining a personal

importance and value of school, and the perception that they are intelligent and learn quickly. Table 2 provides the variety of responses (invariant constituents) and the associated frequency of the response among the six participants.

Table 2

*Student Self-Descriptions*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Perception of being a high achiever, defined by:	6
Doing work to best of ability	3
Try hardest	3
Set my goals to achieve what I want; high goals	2
Expect more of self	1
Academically determined; work hard and stay focused	6
Stay out of trouble	6
Personal importance on value of school	6
Smart, intelligent, learn quickly	3
Little shy	1

The participants in this study shared the perception of themselves as high achieving students. When asked what it meant to be a “high achiever,” the students responded with a few different responses, but similar in nature. High achievers, according to these students, work to the best of their ability, putting their full effort into the task at hand. This was evident in Anita’s words:

To be a high achiever is to do more work to the best of my ability and try my hardest in school and like when my teacher tells me to do something, do it as soon as they tell me to do it . . . I try to do my work the best I can.

Similarly, Draya described working one’s hardest to provide the best work. She stated, “A high achiever means that you try your hardest and work to your best” (Draya).

Building on this notion of giving one’s best effort, another participant described setting high goals and expectations for oneself as a trait identifying high achievers. Theo noted, “My goal right on, they are like high; they are like when I expect more...Expect more of

myself.” According to Arie, these characteristics were associated with being “academically determined.”

Very academically determined and I try to do my best in school which I try not to do, turned out very well like I mean I was doing my art so I’m very accurate and conscious.

From this determination, the high achiever, according to Jaylen, continues to push himself or herself toward constant improvement. Jaylen described:

It is that I work hard to do what I need to do and then I need that always try to push myself to do better.

The students also demonstrated maturity in being able to recognize trouble and not only avoid it, but cognitively discern the need to say no and walk away.

Well, sometimes people ask me to do something that isn’t good and I say no but they pressure me to do it but I just walk away . . . Because I know that if I do it, it’s not going to be a good choice and it might affect on my college so.

In summary of this first thematic category, the students (6 participants) generally thought of themselves as high achievers. They described themselves as being hard working and academically determined (6), staying out of trouble (6), and having a high personal value on education (6). The next thematic category provides the students self-described reasons for their perceived success.

### **Reasons for Academic Success**

The second thematic category revealed why the participants felt they were successful academically. The most common reason for their academic achievement (noted by all six participants) was their determination and hard work, which was reflected in their efforts to do their best and always get the work done on time. Also commonly mentioned as reasons for academic success by participants was studying and paying



attention, staying away from negative influences and trouble, receiving the help from family to stay on task, and the general support from others to always improve. Table 3 illustrates the responses of participants and associated frequencies, highlighting the common factors.

Table 3

*Perceived Reasons for Academic Success*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Determination: work hard, get work done, try hardest	6
Positive attitude toward school	5
Study and pay attention	4
Stay away from negative influence, drama and trouble	3
Help from family to stay on task	3
Because people in life support me to always do better	2
Strive to get good grades	1
Am a high achiever and like to be the best at things	1
Pay attention and listen to teacher	1
Start with mastery of basics and build	1
Try to sit alone, or by myself so not tempted to talk	1
Schedule, keeping stuff in order	1
Part of who I am	1
Never fail to take chances, improve, or do something that will help me in the end	1

As with the first thematic category, the central concept in terms of the reasons for their success was identified as the students' hard work, determination, and ability to maintain a focus on school. These were noted by all six participants. For example, Anita replied, "I try my hardest and I don't try to like slack off on my work, like I turn things all the time and I just do my best" (Anita). Draya reported the same work ethic, getting all her work done, as well as staying away from trouble, as key reasons for her success, stating, "I stay away from drama and I work very hard and I get all my homework done." The idea of getting all of the work done was also mentioned by Theo, who described many of the attributes that he believed have contributed to his success, which included

getting the work done, being respectful and courteous, being responsible and staying on task, all while avoiding the negative influences and behaviors. He described:

Well, I think I'm a successful student because like I do my homework everyday, be respectful, stay on task always being a courteous listener and be respectful all the time, be responsible, don't always have excuses for everything, just take responsibility for my actions and stuff, avoid negative influences, don't hang around with the wrong crowd, always participate in activities and stuff like that.

These participants demonstrated a positive attitude toward school for various reasons. Brian simply stated, "Because I like to learn new things." When Arie was asked why she comes to school, the answer was "To better my life basically." One example of this positive attitude was given by Anita, who described that if school was not required, she would still attend school not only because of the importance and need for education, but also because she likes school. She explained:

If school was not required yes I would attend school because I need education, some kids they're like I hate school, I don't want to be here but I like school like in the summer it's like I try to get to my school rather early because I can't wait to get to school and I like school like no one that school can help me through life like if I don't go to school I wouldn't if I would never went to school I wouldn't be the person that I am right now, I would probably be totally different and school is like work, a job you have to go everyday and school is like I just applied for a job and I got to go. So I would attend school.

As with the previous section, studying and maintaining focus on school work was considered a reason for success academically; "I study a lot and I focus on what I have to do" (Brian). These academically successful youth spent time to ensure all the assignments were completed on time, and that all class work and homework were completed and turned in. Draya agreed, stating, "I turn work in on time. I do all my class work and homework." Finally, Jaylen also noted the contributing factors of paying attention, staying out of trouble, doing the work, and studying as much as possible in order to get good grades. Jaylen described how he has been able to maintain his grades,

“Just to keep paying attention, stay out of trouble, stay off the streets, keep doing I need to do is to do homework every day, study as much as and get good grades.” From these examples and those of the previous thematic category, it is evident how each participant’s own sense of the definition of a high achiever is reflected in his/her actions to maintain their achievement, and thus, is serving to support his/her personal belief in him/herself as a high achiever. These perceptions would also affect each participant’s personal goals for the future.

### **Goals for Future**

The third thematic category revealed by the data was that of participant goals for the future, which was developed from expressed goals for the immediate future (after finishing middle school), and for the long range future (after finishing high school). Common immediate goals included moving on to the high school, playing sports/athletics in high school, and graduating from high school. Common long-range goals included going to college, having a professional career, and continuing to participate in sports (for some, professional sports). Table 4 highlights the goals expressed by the students and the associated frequencies of mention among the six participants.

Table 4

*Participant Goals for Future*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
<b>Immediate goals (leaving MS)</b>	
Move onto HS	4
Play sports in HS	3
Get HS diploma	2
Continue to get the same grades	1
Take honors classes	1
<b>Long Range goals (after HS)</b>	
Go to college	6
Have a professional career	5
Play sports	3
Help care for family	1
Have own house	1
Be married	1

The participants discussed both immediate goals upon finishing middle school, and long term goals in terms of their life expectations after graduating from high school. All six participants expected to graduate from high school and further their education in college. For example, Arie commented on her plans for after finishing middle school:

Well I go to high school, work on classes that will get me into the college and profession that I want and keep in the same grades and working harder than I now work, actually harder.

Some participants had very specific professions that they aspired to attain, such as Draya, who described, “I want to go to high school and college to work as a veterinarian,” and Anita, who stated, “I want to go to college to be a nurse.”

In addition to academics, college, and their future professional goals, three participants discussed the goal of playing sports in high school and maybe further into college or the professional arena. Starting with high school sports, Theo mentioned:

[In high school] I want to play basketball; also I want to be in honors classes. I want to, like, try to do two sports. I want to play like basketball and football in my first year.

Similarly, Jaylen described the goal of playing sports in college while studying to become an engineer. He described, "I want to go to college to play sports but if I don't make it to sports I want to go to NIU to be a Mechanical Engineer."

For one participant, Brian, one of the reasons for these goals was to be able to help take care of his family if needed, and help to support his younger siblings' educational growth. He explained, "Like if my mom is like sick or something, I'll help her and help my little brother and my little sister be more intelligent too." This concept demonstrated remarkable maturity for a young student, a maturity that may be one reason for the seemingly highly responsible behaviors and decisions surrounding all six of the participants in terms of their descriptions of self and motivations for the future.

The participants' immediate goals generally showed interest in getting to high school (4), playing sports in high school (3), and ultimately graduating from high school (2). In addition, the participants offered long term goals, which highlighted going to college (all 6 participants), obtaining a professional career (5), and playing professional sports (3). To achieve these goals, participants acknowledged the need to look to role models and others who can assist them in the process.

**Assistance and Role Models**

The fourth thematic category was developed from participant responses revealing others who provided assistance to the participant in achieving their success and those who serve as role models for the participants. Key to this thematic category are the perceived roles of teachers, friends, and family in assisting the academic development of the students and in particular, the role of the mothers, not only through the act of helping when needed, but also as a role model to the participants, often due to the mother's work ethic, success, and helpful and caring nature.

Table 5

*Assistance Provided and Role Models*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Person who helps you to be successful: go to for help	
Teacher; go directly to teacher for extra help	4
Mother	3
Friends	3
Family	1
Sometimes a tutor	1
Role model: Person look up to	
Mother	3
Father	1
Uncle	1
School Assistant Principal	1
Why do you consider this person to be a role model and want to be like this person	
Because she or he is successful in life	4
Her work ethic	2
Tries to help	2
Entrepreneurial attitude	2
Because he has wisdom and inspires me	1
Because is the main person in my life	1
Good person	1
Smart	1

This thematic category provides evidence to the critical individuals and their interactions that serve to support the achievement of these student participants. The responses highlight the roles of teachers, family, and friends, with an emphasis on the familial role of the participant's mother. For some of the participants, several or all of



these influences affected them significantly in one way. For example, Anita highlighted the assistance of teachers, as well as friends, that have supported her academic achievement.

If I don't get how to do something I tried to ask my teacher to help me and stay out for lunch and I go to and I have people, my friends help me because I don't want to get bad grades. So if I can't understand I always have to get help because I don't want to not know how to do it. . . . I don't do like after-school tutoring but like when I am having trouble in those subjects, I go to my teacher, like in Math, I go to Ms. Kemp, my Math teacher and she helps me during lunch and if [it's] Social Studies, I ask for a help through our class. I know Ms. Felton, she is a student teacher and now Ms. Felton, she helps me a lot [and] knows everybody.

Others mentioned different combinations of people supporting them, such as Draya, who mentioned, "My mom or my teachers," later also noting the assistance of friends, "Friends, I study with them. . . my mom and my family [and] friends." Arie also noted, "My friends and the teachers and others." Friends and family members were key to the discussion of individuals who assist them in their progress. Jaylen described the help of extended family, not only mom and dad, stating, "My mom, my dad always keep me on task, always help me out. My uncle, my grandma help me out too sometimes, when I need it."

One of the key people within the family providing assistance toward achievement was their mother. Three of the participants directly noted the impact of their mothers on their ability to be academically successful. Anita described:

If something is hard, I tell my mom. She was like, you know, she would be like, "well maybe we need to get you some extra help," because my mom helps me the most out of everyone. Sometimes I know I get mad at my mom, but I still thank her for helping me and doing all the things she does for me that contributes to school.

Similarly, Brian noted his mother's persistence in helping him and not allowing him to fail.

Because my mom, she doesn't allow me to fail, she allows me, like, when I am like not responding, something wrong or something, she helps me with that and she like teaches me that, like, when I have to study, she will help me study and that helps me do what I do.

In terms of role models, the participants mentioned a variety of family members (mother, father, uncle) as well as one participant who described the school assistant principal as a role model. Brian stated, "I look up to my father." Jaylen looked up to his uncle, "Because he always looks after me and he always tries to help me with everything I do." A common response (given by three participants) was the role model of their mother and the reasoning for choosing her varied. The following excerpts reflect the thoughts of two of these participants and the deep respect they seem to hold for their mothers. Arie explained:

Because she is successful, she does it. . . . She is never sitting down; she was always trying to do something, to get it done and to work on it. Because she is African-American in this economy too and this minority and she is a single parent, she is working and does whatever she has to do to take care both of us.

Anita shared:

Because my mom is like a good person and she is smart and she took the, she took advantage of the success she had and she can make her way through life and she is not going to be struggling and stuff.

Finally, one participant reported a role model of the assistant principal. This person was inspiring to the student, he had been helpful in terms of the academic achievement of the student, and he is successful in his career. Theo described:

I look up to the assistant principal because he inspires me and like basically, like, he'll be there for me and stuff and like, he'll keep me concentrated and stuff and stay focused in my work and stuff and like, if I need help with a question, he knows it because, like, he's been there . . . yeah, that's why I like him the most. He inspires me because, like, he keeps motivating constantly and focused because, like, he tells me stuff that no one else will say. Like, he is the right person to ask because he has been through a lot and he is an African-American man just like I

am going to be. He like been through, Mr. Davis understands and he has a lot of wisdom.

Thus, the participants cited a primary role model in their mothers, who were chosen as a role model because of their life success, work ethic, helping behaviors, and entrepreneurial attitude. Others described as helpers included teachers and peers. Building upon these findings, the next thematic category delves into the family and home influences.

### **Family and Home Influences**

The fifth thematic category was formed from several sub-categories. These sub-categories described participant responses related to the family contribution to their success, family related hindrances to school achievement and how the student was able to maintain achievement levels despite these issues, their general home life and situation, and household factors contributing or limiting their success.

**Family contribution to success.** Key to the idea of the family's contribution to the success of the student was the perception of the mother as helpful whenever the student was in need of assistance, studying for tests and helping with homework. Only one participant of the six felt the family did not help in academic achievement. The other five participants described family members, particularly the mothers, who provided support and encouragement and assisted with work, placed importance on school, and conveyed confidence in the students' ability to be academically successful. In addition, all six participants reported being able to effectively study at home. Table 6 illustrates these responses with associated frequencies of mention among the six participants.

Table 6

*Family Contributions to Success*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Positive encouragement, support, and assistance from parents and other family members	6
Ability to study at home	6
Mother helps whenever needed	2
Help with studying for tests and with homework	2
Mom places importance on school	1
Mom knows I can achieve	1
Aunts prepare me for what I will have to do to make it	1
All help by checking on me, how I'm doing in school, saying can call if have problems	1
Family does not help	1

All six participants noted the encouragement and support received from their family as a contribution to their success. For example, Arie noted:

I guess just the word that I get from my mom and everybody around me, so I know that what I'm doing is right. So in order to maintain that, I just have to, I just have to work on it, even if I'm not in that good environment, they still make me know that I need to be doing what I'm doing.

Similarly, Draya described the positive effects of family on her achievement, highlighting her mother's influence; "They sometimes help me with my homework and my mom, she like come to the school and sometimes ask my teachers for any help or something."

Draya continued by adding, "At home, my family, they like help me and push me harder and stuff and tell me like to do good and stuff." Brian supported this idea, including his father and grandmother in terms of their contribution; "They help me study for my test and everyday my grandma teaches me something that she does on computer system and my dad also." Arie also described the help of her family and extended family:

Well my mom, she, whenever I need help, I guess, she - if she knows - then she will try to help. In like my cousins and my aunts, they tell me like stuff that they had to go through so what they are now and how much work you have to do and so they warned me ahead of time and actually try to help me now.

Another key aspect of family contribution was being able to study effectively at home, which was noted by all six participants. Most studied in their rooms. For example, Anita noted, “Yeah, I do [study] in my room and close the door.” Similarly, Brian stated, “I study in my room” and Draya agreed, noting that she is able to study with the family, or sometimes alone in her room. Draya said, “Sometimes I study in the room with my family but like if they’re noisy or stuff I go to my room.” Theo described the areas in which he studies and the rationale for them in his slightly more in-depth discussion of studying at home. He stated:

Yeah I study at home. I study like in quiet places like the dining room and stuff or I play music in my [room], but most of the time, I’m like listening to music when I’m studying, because like when I get creative or when I’m playing stuff, creative thinking going and if I’m listening to music and people are talking at the same time, like it deletes my creative thinking that I had going. So I would be like, to be in silence, so I go back to [my] room, going to a quite place.

In sum, the family was perceived to contribute positively to their success (all 6 participants). This was accomplished through providing encouragement (6), the ability to study at home (6), and assistance with homework and academics by the mother (2). The next sub-category discusses the home related hindrances perceived to affect achievement.

**Challenges to school achievement related to family.** Particular events or circumstances in the family life were seen by participants as disruptive to the achievement process. These included deaths in the family, period of homelessness, difficulties with parents (such as divorce), and having to stay with extended family. The participants described “pushing through it” by continuing to do the required work,

staying focused, and “brainstorming” to find own way through the troubled time. Table 7 demonstrates the diversity of responses and the commonality in terms of the ability to continue to achieve.

Table 7

*Family and Home Related Challenges to School Achievement*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Household distractions	6
Younger sibling(s)	3
Fighting or arguing	1
Dogs	1
people talking, yelling, calling me, at door	1
Death in family	3
Lack of functional computer at home	2
Homelessness, living in shelter for a time	1
Difficulties with parents; stay with grandma	1
Dad not being around	1
Watching television	1
How able to maintain grades during difficult times	
Pushed through it; did the work; keep pushing on	4
Stayed focused on what had to do	1
Brainstorm and find my own way	1

The most common family and home related challenges were various distractions, whether siblings, pets, arguing, or just people talking. For example, Anita and Brian mentioned the distractions of their younger siblings. Anita stated, “Probably my little sister. She comes banging on the door.” Similarly, Brian described, “When my little brother is doing some work because he then like, I got like one desk in my room that we can be like, do our homework on.” Jaylen mentioned his dogs as well as his brothers, saying, “My dogs, even my brothers sometimes . . . They bark or they like just play around too much . . . [They] mess with me.” Sometimes arguments or fights were given as distractions to the students, which could be between siblings or among adults. For

example, Draya responded, “At home, like, my uncle and mom get into slight fights kind of.”

Death in the family was given as a challenge for three participants, revealing a common challenge among the sample participants, affecting the emotional state and functionality of the students at school. Anita described an experience of loss and how it affected her:

Well during the first couple of weeks to school I was actually kind of sad because two day before school started I was at my grandfather’s funeral and that was kind of hard for me to go to school because that was my grandfather and all you want to have and so yeah that’s made.

Another obstacle was a lack of computer available in the home. Anita described how the computer she had was not functioning at the present and therefore, she was left without one. She asserted, “I have one of them (computer) left; it’s a desktop computer in [the] living room, but they are not working right now” (Anita). Similarly, Arie did not have a computer in the home, she described going to her aunt’s house to use a computer. “Right now, we don’t have one at the moment; I go to my aunt’s house everyday anyway so I use theirs” (Arie). Anita also noted not having a computer at home, but unlike Arie, did not have anywhere to go to use a computer. When asked where she went to use a computer, her response was “Nowhere.”

For Brian, the problem was bigger than simply not having a computer at home, as there was a time he did not have a home at all. Brian described his experience, “Because for times, we didn’t like have a home, so we had to live in the shelter and stuff.” Indeed the neighborhood was seen as an obstacle in terms of the dangers. Theo explained:



Well, yeah like sometimes, you know, it's kind of hard as a young man growing up in sort of a hard neighborhood. Like sometimes, like I probably display it physically, and you probably don't have it right at that time and it's just hard, you know, the same day is the time where this, the try outs that you probably don't have and it is that because is fault of your parent because they not as a parent doing their duty. I think that effects most students, what they haven't done, what has passed them up because they won't get enough family support that they needed.

Given these challenges, the students were asked how they have managed to persevere and maintain their academic achievement level. Draya answered by saying that she just had to "push through," which seemed like a theme in several participants' perceptions and details. Draya continued, "I maintain my grades by just keep moving and I push on." Anita, who had suffered a loss in the family, further explained:

Well I just had to tell myself that I know he is in a better place and I didn't have to be sad and I just try to push through it and I did my work and I just, we don't wipe my days and I just had to realize that I know he is probably watching over me.

Thus, the family also contributes to obstacles to academic achievement, which must be overcome. These included primarily, household distractions of other family members and/or pets, significant deaths in the family, or a lack of computer in the home. Further looking at these issues, participants offered discussion about factors related to everyday life.

**Factors related to everyday home life.** The third sub-category under the theme of family and home influences encompassed factors that relate to the students' everyday home life experiences. These experiences included relationships with family members; having a stable home, versus moving around and living with relatives; inter-family communication; parental separation and who the student lived with; degree of extended family involvement; level of education among parents and other family members; amount

of importance placed on education in the family; and finally, how the student spends his or her free time. Key findings indicate that although many of the parents did not attend or complete college, the mothers in particular placed a strong sense of value on education, even offering rewards for academic achievement.

Table 8

*Factors Related to Home Life*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Good relationship with family	4
Stable home; do not move around	3
Shift in home environment: times when stay with other relatives	4
Parental separation	2
Parents education level	
Parents did not attend college	3
Mother attended college	1
Father did not attend college	1
Both parents went to college, but mom dropped out	1
Unsure	1
Parents value on education	
Earn going out to eat or other reward with good grades	5
For mom, education is a priority or strong priority	4
Education critical for learning new things and being successful in life	2
Dad supportive	1
Go to school and get education	1
Having household responsibilities/chores	6
How spend free time	
watch TV	4
Sometimes stay at home, sometimes go out with friends	5
Talk with friends	2
Play computer games; get on computer	2
Play sports	2

Four participants described having a good relationship with his/her family, further supporting their success. Draya shared:

And me and my mom we have a good relationship like when my sister is not there like when she is with her dad, me and my mom we just sit in the room and I'll be like lying up on my mom and all kinds of stuff, and like hugging her all the time, and I have a good relationship with my mom because I don't know I call it bonding.

Brian described a good relationship with his family in terms of communication, and talking about the day at school as a family. Brian explained, "Well, we communicate, we say what happened from my day at school and then be as a family." This communication also supported the achievement of the student. It seemed the connection to the family was important to the participants' sense of importance.

The emotional stability supplied by the family with strong relationships seems to have mediated the insecurities of not having a stable home for four of the participants.

For Anita, the moving around remained between her parents different homes:

Well during the summer it's like I live with my dad because my mom works and during the summer since I have nothing to do I don't stay home by myself. And I'll be with my dad all the time but during school it's with my mom but only like off days and in weekends I am with my dad.

For Theo, however, the problems between his parents created a situation in which he went from a stable home for most of his life, to living first with his mother, then with his father, and then to his grandmother's home. Theo stated:

I only move to town I lived with my mom and my dad, my dad and mom was married for like 12 years lived with my dad and my mom most of my life and then I came out here when my mom and my dad got divorced after the 12 years then that when they spilt up then I went, I was with my mom at that time in Chicago but then I moved up here with my dad, my dad who lives in our own house because only three of us and with and his girlfriend and his sister all of us lived together in our own house and that's when my dad he was in custody so we had to move out of the house and his girlfriend went Chicago and stuff to live with my house and we went to our grannies she kind of supported us.

This type of home life instability would seem to be a significant hindrance to academic achievement, especially if the student was attending several different schools during this time. It is important, therefore, to explore how the student maintained his academic achievement level.

Two participants cited the separation of their parents as a factor related to home and family affecting their achievement. Theo continued the story of his experiences with the difficulties between his parents, describing:

My mom, she's doing good. I go see my dad sometimes like once a month or twice a month. I'll see him at the correctional center up there . . . and I'll go see him and stuff. He ask me how I'm going to school and stuff and I tell him like what I accomplished and what I'm trying to accomplish and what I want to and he tell me, best of luck, like that. I ask him if he's doing okay [and] are they treating him good down there and stuff, [to] make sure he's okay. Sometimes, I send him money when I get it, you know, tell him it's okay, I'm always getting money because I am living a successful life. So I try to help my friends, the people I need before people and people outside of my community that need help and when I walk past, I see somebody that need money playing the guitar or something drum, try to share some give money and stuff.

Anita described living between her parents' homes, although she only switches during vacation times, which would stabilize her academic experience despite the home shift (i.e., not affecting which school she attends because home shifts are during non-school times).

Well during the summer it's like I live with my dad because my mom works and during the summer since I have nothing to do I don't stay home by myself. And I'll be with my dad all the time but during school it's with my mom but only like off days and in weekends I am with my dad.

The participants described value that was placed on education by their parents, despite that most of the parents did not obtain a college education themselves. The students expressed the belief that this priority placed on education was due to their

parents wanting them to do well in life, better than themselves. Draya described how she understood why her mother was hard on her in terms of holding her to high academic standards. Draya explained, “She thinks education is a big deal and I should get a good one. Because she is like really hard on me. She wants me to do well in life. She wants me to do better than her.” Jaylen also noted his parents pushing him to “get a good education.” When the researcher asked Jaylen his opinion of why his parents feel strongly about the importance of education, Jaylen answered, “Because they want me to do better than what they did in school.” Finally, Anita described her experiences with her mother and the importance placed on her educational achievement over other events and activities.

[For] my mom, school is first priority. Like, if I have something going on after school and one of my cousins [is] having a birthday party, I have to go to the birthday party, but my mom [says], no you got to go to whatever you got at school, like after school, we want to go to All-City. I can't miss it at all; she won't let me and my dad, he like, when I get good grades, he likes [it]. We go celebrate; like, he take me out to eat and stuff and when I got 10 and I got like [a] bad grade on the test or worksheet, he'll say, I know you can do better and you can try harder.

As in the example given by Anita, the parents of these students often offered the students praise and rewards for their academic achievements. The students described monetary rewards, sweets, and going out to eat. For example, Brian noted, “Sometimes we go out to eat or like my grandma, she will make a cake for us.” Draya also described rewards, stating “For each A, my mom gives me five dollars and like she will do something like buy me stuff or take me out to eat or something.” These monetary rewards were also expressed by Theo, who described rewards given by different members of the extended family. He explained:

They say good job Theo! Keep doing what you're doing. [They] probably give me allowance or they probably say they [will] give me something that same day and stuff. I probably tell my other relatives and they will also give me money and they come and look at my report card and stuff.

To sum the thematic category related to the home environment and experiences, the family contributed to many positive experiences and values. The participants generally reported positive relationships (4), both stable and unstable physical locations of home (3 stables, 4 unstable times). Two participants reported difficulties surrounding parental separation. Half of the participants (3) reported that their parents did not attend college; however, education for the majority of participants was stressed in the home with rewards for good grades (5). This value of education was particularly reported on the part of the mother (4). Next, the discussion moves toward responses regarding peer influences.

### **Peer Influences**

Peer influences on academic success formed the sixth thematic category. This thematic category was separated further into three sub-categories. These included friendships, other peer relationships, and racial conflict. The findings revealed primarily constructive and supportive friendship relationships, other peer relationships demonstrating positive and negative effects on the students, and racial tensions, which was described in relation to the Academy program.

**Friendships.** Data revealed a predominance of friendships with other academically successful students, and those who tended to stay out of trouble or not get involved in “the wrong things.” According to five of the participants, these relationships served to mutually support achievement by providing help to each other, positively influencing each other, and participating in health competition with each other.

Table 9

*Peer Influences: Friendships*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Friends are academically successful	6
Stay out of trouble	6
Help each other achieve	5
Great relationships with friends	4
Look up to each other and support and influence each other	3
Healthy competition; try to keep up with each other	3
Variety of academic levels	2
Did not really influence	1

All six of the participants in this study described their friends as academically successful and as individuals who tended to stay out of trouble. Anita described her own friends and experiences:

My friend Kim, she has a good performance in school; she is academically successful . . . and then my friend Janice, she is successful, kind of, but she was good at school; she don't get into that much trouble.

Arie described her friends as being on par with her own achievement, or even better. Her description demonstrated similarities between herself and her friends in terms of achievement and staying out of trouble. She explained how they are similar and how they are able to influence each other positively:

They are basically just about at the same grades as I do, some even better than me like sometimes. Because all my friends are basically like me, so they stay out of trouble and they look up, we look up to each other, basically, we'll influence each other.

Given the potential for poor achievement when students stray into "trouble" areas, the response indicating that the students' peers also generally stay out of trouble seems



essential to continued achievement. With the support of peers, who also make good social decisions, these students demonstrate a capacity to identify the risks associated with participating in questionable activities and the relative importance of good decision making, keeping each other in line, so to speak, and again supporting an unexpected level of maturity among these young students. Jaylen stated:

They always tell me just stay out of trouble. One of my friends is Trey he always telling me to stay out of trouble and just do your work in this do whatever you need to do and just stay out of trouble.

The friendships serve to also assist directly in academic achievement, as the friends help each other in their academics. Arie described the help of her friends when she does not understand the content or material very well:

They actually helped me a lot like if I don't get something I'm not around to teach you they say actually go step by step if I like from I hear something and actually show me their notes and all of that kind of stuff. . . . Because we look to each other for help and for influences and so when one gets higher the other one just achieve it too.

Similarly, Draya described the assistance of her friends with homework or other class work. She noted, "Like at home, if I do homework where I can't understand stuff, I like call my friends and ask them how they do a problem to really explain it to me."

Jaylen described the helping nature of the relationship in that they make him achieve more while prompting him to help others more than he helps himself. He stated, "They make me one that does better and make me one that helps them more than I helped myself." Theo also explained the friendships as helpful to academic achievement and learning, expressing:

Like sometimes like if I need help with a question or something, most of the time, my friends, they know it or if they don't, I just probably like, they probably tell me to ask one of their friends that they know or something like that or they probably would help me with the question and probably like evaluate it and like

break it down to me what it means or something like that or they probably tell me what to do and stuff like that.

The relationships between friends were described as being “great” where they got along well and had a great deal in common. Draya stated, “Me and my friends hang out a lot; we get along because we have things in common.” Likewise, Theo explained his experiences and the mutual benefits of the friend relationships:

I’ll always like be there for them, anybody that has a question. I always listen to them and answer it and would try [to help] them and I think never tease them and nothing. I’ll be by their side through every choice they make, and I always compliment them on their accomplishment [and] what they achieve and I’ll try my best and do my best and start a role model for them, and [when] they accomplish [something], they are like compliment[ing] me and it's me doing good, than they are like “good job, good job.” We talk about what we accomplished and stuff like that and always have good conversation, never, you know, argue and nothing like that.

Another positive aspect of the friendship relationships described by the participants was that of the healthy competition between the friends. This was touched on in Theo’s explanation, but is explained more in-depth by the following examples.

Arie explained, “We try to keep up with each other. So, if someone is higher [achieves a higher grade], then we work harder.” Draya and Jaylen also expressed this positive competitive influence: Draya explained:

Their performance influenced my achievements because if I see them get good grades, I want to do like them and get good grades too. When they do well in school, it like pushes me harder because my competitor is going to do better.

Jaylen shared:

Some of my friends have like a high expectation on what they can do [academically] but I try to do better [than] what they can do, and like one of my friends is like neck and neck with [me in] grades, in academics and achievements.

In addition, treatment by other peers (i.e., those not considered close friends) demonstrated some dichotomy of responses, where some felt these other peers looked up

to the academic achievement of the participants and others reported being bullied or teased because of their academic achievement.

Table 10

*Peer Influences: Other Peers*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Peers look up to academic achievement	3
No difficulties with peers	2
Difficulties with bullying or teasing	2
Cordial	1
Some good, some bad	1
Same as with friends, give advice and help	1
Want help with their work	1

The findings related to other peer relationships (among peers not considered to be close friends) were split. Four participants described that these other peers looked up to them for their academic achievement, had no difficulties with other peers, and/or the other peers treated them much like their friends did. At the same time, two other participants described experiences of teasing and bullying, sometimes related to their achievement in school. For example, Arie described more positive experiences with other peers, “They actually look up to it.” Draya expressed that she felt she received respect for her hard work and academic accomplishments. She stated, “They like, I’m trying to think of that word, like give me honor because they know that I am doing good.” As a last example of the positive relationships, Brian described his other peer relationships as similar to his friendship relationships, stating, “They treat me like my friends treat me, they treat me like they really are my friends”

Conversely, two participants reported incidents of bullying or teasing as a result of “being smart.” Anita described her friends as those “true friends that I can say are my

real friends, the ones that don't try to hurt me and that help me when I am down and were not far to help me up." However, Anita also described her experiences with other peers, which were very negative and destructive relationships:

A lot of the students, I don't have good relationship [with] because I try to stay away from some of these kids because they're not a good role models for any type of person. They just, it's just wrong the ways some of these kids act like. They just, just because the way you look, they say they don't like you and they just talk about you as soon as you all pass and they laugh at you and everything and so I try to stay away from them because they could be talking about somebody and just bullying somebody and I don't want to be with them when they do that because I am not that type of person.

Anita continued to explain how, as a result, she felt she does not fit in. She described:

I don't fit in . . . I don't, and I was told that I am White, don't know why, but the kids they make fun of me, so I try to stay away from them. . . They make fun of me because they know that I am smarter than them because a lot of the kids they don't get good grades like they get C's, D's and F's, and when I'd be like I don't get no C's like I always get A's and B's, they get mad, it's not my fault that you're not doing as good as you should be.

Jaylen described experiencing both negative peer relationships (bullying or teasing) and more positive or non-negative relationships. He explained:

Sometimes they're annoying sometimes they're okay, it's like it's both ways because sometimes they would just mess with and just keep messing with you and then lot of time they were like hi, how you're doing, are you alright and all that.

Finally, with regard to peer relationships, racial differences and tensions were noted to exist between students by two of the six participants, with four participants denying any such issues. However, it was noted that one of the reports of racial tension discussed highlighted the tension between the Academy students, who are mostly White, and the non-Academy students, who are mostly African American at the school. To clarify, the Academy is a specialized program for advanced students. If the students qualify academically, they are give the choice to apply to the academy program or not.

As noted, however, the academy maintains a high proportion of White students compared to the general population. The minority (African American and Hispanic) students tended to opt out of attending the accelerated program (the Academy), whereas the White students tended to embrace the program. Therefore, further exploring why the student participants did not apply or belong to the Academy program revealed interesting insight into this dynamic. Two participants talked about the Academy students as demonstrating actions reflecting a perception of superiority over other students.

Because of these actions, the participants decided not to apply to the Academy. Further research into this aspect of the analysis is needed to identify whether the racial tension contributes to the lack of participation in the Academy by African American students or the superiority complex associated with the Academy generates racial tension.

Table 11

*Conflict Related to Racial Differences and Academy Program Participation*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
<b>Racial conflicts</b>	
No racial tensions, difficulties, or conflicts reported	4
Racial differences and tensions	2
<b>Perceptions of Academy participation: Why did not apply</b>	
Title suggests superiority (being better than everyone else)	2
Did not need it	1
Afraid of not achieving; of not being smart enough	1
Did not know how to apply	1
Did apply, but said ran out of space	1
Thought would not be fun - too much work	1

Two of the six participants described experiences of racial conflict between students. Theo explained the behaviors and how racial stereotypes can form other's opinions of you.

If he go, "I hate white people" and all that, and then I'll be looking at them like, and they say something, black people say they black, they say, "I hate black people," but sometimes some people probably say that at the moment because some black kid is at the school, African-Americans they, they make people, they only kind of look bad because of the things they do and I think that's why other kids might hate black people. I wish I was white because sometimes the white people get along, they stick together they don't argue and fight with each other like African-Americans do. They [the African American students here] don't stay together, they like to fight each other and do dumb stuff. That's the reason now that most men in jail and stuff like that.

Perhaps critical to this analysis, Anita described the racial tensions related to the Academy program, explaining that the kids in the Academy program tended to be White.

In Anita's words:

Well it's racial conflicts again. I mean between the non-Academy kids and the Academy kids because the Academy kids the way they act is they say, I act wild with the Academy kids they just like, they call us like stupid people and stuff like. (Interviewer: What's the primary race of the Academy program?) White. White kids and then the primary race of just the non-academies [is] mostly black and so it's like people will be feeling like they just like racial it's like that some of the teachers and the kids are racist because they are like you know and they just like the faces and give you looks when you walk by them. . . they give looks and stuff and I don't like it.

This racial difference between the Academy and non-Academy students leads into the participants' perceptions of the Academy program itself, those involved in the program, and why these students chose not to apply to the program. Arie described being more comfortable with the non-Academy student population, noting the "title" given to those Academy program students. She explained:

I just feel more comfortable with everyone else like just they are normal but I just where I'm in now I'm doing like basically everything that they do so is that was the difference, you just - you have a title. . . so it's like just make yourself look higher than others.

Brian also expressed this idea of the Academy students feeling like they are smarter than other people. He noted that this was a reason for himself not applying for the program, that he did not want others to think that of him. He described that he did not apply to the program, "because people think that they are smart like stuff, so I don't want people to think that just because they are not in there [the program], they are not smart." This is an interesting finding of the study and begs the question as to whether the racial tensions are the cause of tensions between the Academy students or whether the described superiority complex among the Academy students promotes racial tensions due to the racial split between the groups.

Peer relationships, like the family influences, provided both positive and negative influences on academic performance. Some of these peer influences may also be tied to



specific school and teacher influences. This may be evident in the differences and difficulties noted between the Academy program students and the other students. Therefore, school and teacher influences, as described by participants, is discussed next.

### **School and Teacher Influences**

A seventh thematic category was developed related to school and teacher influences on students affecting academic achievement success. Key to this thematic category are teacher contributions of emotional and academic support to the students, student experiences of racism, and teacher relationships providing positive feedback to students to support achievement. Table 12 illustrates the variety of responses and the associated frequency of occurrence among the six participants.

Table 12

*School and Teacher Influences*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Teacher contributions to success	
Keep on track; keeps from slacking	4
Emotional and academic support	2
Provide extra help when needed	2
Keep out of trouble	1
Teaching different learning styles and needs	1
Experience of racism in classroom or with teachers	
None	5
Being treated differently: Grouped together separate from class	1
Teacher relationships	
Positive feedback	6
Good relationship with all the teachers	4
Relationship is neither great nor bad	2
Rewards	2

The teachers were seen as critical to the academic success of these participants. The teachers were described as keeping them on track and focused, providing the needed support, both academically and emotionally, and keeping them out of trouble. For instance, Jaylen discussed, “They [the teachers] make me – they keep me out of trouble. They always pay attention to me. Every time when I get out of line, they always get me back in place.” Theo described special relationships with his teachers in which they taught and helped him and he, in turn, stays on task and performs as well as he can throughout the year.

I learned it from teachers' experiences because like most every year I have a like a sort of special teachers yeah they teach me a lot to the year I be there with them and I try to make their life more easier by not giving them trouble and stand on task and doing my homework everyday, so throughout the year as I learn more with them where each teacher help you.

Likely recognizing the students' potential, the teachers were described as keeping them on track and out of trouble. Anita explained how the teachers would pull her aside to discuss things if she were slacking, but also providing support to encourage continued success:

Like if they see that I am like slacking a little they pull me to the side and tell me about it and they know they would tell me like I know you can do this and they give me stuff that they know that I am capable of doing and they just like they kind of support me and so when I am down is some teachers that I can go to and they like cheered up and they contribute a whole lot my maybe academically successful.

The teachers were also seen as helpful in terms of providing the extra help when needed. Brian described, "If I need help or something, they help me and they like, if I really don't get it, then they will meet, come after school and they'll help me with that."

Teacher relationships were described generally as very good with teachers providing positive feedback and encouragement for the students. For example, Anita noted, "I have a good relationship with all the teachers here. Let me see, I don't think there are any teachers that I don't have a good relationship with" (Anita). Theo described having a "special" relationship with some teachers, one in which they know him and what to expect from him.

Like, our relationship is kind of like tight. We got like a special bond and kind of understanding because, like I'll tell them like everything that occurs, so they can know like, so they won't be like, "Why are you late" and stuff and so I like at the beginning of the year, like, I probably write a story about who, who are you and I'm like, what's your life like and stuff like that, you do that, I would tell my basic everything, because I want them to know ahead of time, so it won't be like, no sort of problem or something. So I like tell them everything and I talk to them

and when I need them, like, tell them about my problems and stuff that I'm having at home or right in school and stuff like that.

The teachers provided positive feedback and encouragement to the students, particularly at critical times when the students may be “slacking off” a bit, times when the teacher’s words are important to keeping the students focused and on track. The following examples demonstrate the teacher responses to student achievement, as described by the student participants. These examples demonstrate positive reinforcement and encouragement as well as the teachers keeping them on track, by noticing when they may be slipping in their studies a little, and encouraging them to raise their efforts to maintain their academic excellence. Anita stated:

They're like we're not getting good grades they write like good job and like on my report cards they can give feedback and they'd be, they say like glad to have in class and very good in class and they are like give me supportive words.

Arie shared:

They find it just astonishing and like unbelievable . . . [They react] just normal like it's just not, they don't have any worse moments, because it's normal for me to get it so they are not surprised. Because, well, if I don't do so well it's something they say to me, like, this is not you, like, you do excellent, that you are one of the role models in this class, like, I want you to help students, but you have to work on this.

Theo contributed:

They say, “Theo, you're doing a wonderful job. Keep it up.” They say, “keep it up” and “good job” and they are, they're like, “Theo, you're doing well” and stuff and they are like, “Oh no, just keep doing what you're doing,” you know. They just keep complimenting me and stuff.

In addition to these described positive relationships and influences, one participant revealed experiences of evidence of racism in the classrooms. Anita explained her prior experiences in elementary school in terms of separation in the classroom and being treated differently. This instance of racism, as noted previously,

seems to be related to the racial distinctions between Academy and non-Academy students. Anita reported:

There have been a couple incidents and, well this was in elementary school, and it was just my third grade teacher. I thought she was very racist because she took all the Black kids in our class and she put them in one group and made all of us copy the dictionary. And she told all the other kids the Mexicans and the White that they can move their seats anywhere they want to put and sit anywhere. I felt that was just really racist because it was just a group of Black children in one group copying the dictionary and all the other kids were just doing whatever they wanted and that made me so upset. Well and last year, when I tried out for the Volleyball team, the coach, she picked all the Academy kids. It was two Black girls on whole sixth and seventh grade team and I feel that some Academy teachers treat the, treat us that's not in the academy because most of us are Black and she treat us differently like she kicked my friend off the door like not kick but she wouldn't let us come inside this morning when everybody is supposed to be inside. She wouldn't let us come in and she made us close the door and we had this same until we could the door could be open for us.

Teacher and school influences encompass the segment of school occurring during the regular school hours. However, school influences extend beyond those in-school hours to extended day activities. The next section will discuss after-school and extra-curricular activities and the perceived influences on achievement.

### **After-school and Extra-curricular Activities**

Student participation in afterschool and extra-curricular activities represented an eighth thematic category. The student participants in this study all actively participated in afterschool or extra-curricular activities of some kind, either school-based or community-based. The most common activities included sports activities and music activities, with both school level and community level participation in both types of activities.

Table 13

*After-school and Extra-curricular Activities*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Sports	6
Music, choir, band, or orchestra at school	4
Afterschool program	2
Community wide, all schools orchestra	1
Care camp program	1
Church or religious involvement	1
Girls for success	1

The students in this study described their extra-curricular and after-school activities. All six participants reported athletic participation of some kind and four of the six described participating in music, choir, band, or orchestra at school. Anita described her participation in sports, music programs, and other activities:

I am trying for Volleyball when it comes, but I am in this program called Care Camp and it's like a internal program, even though I am not a bad student, but I just chose to do it, and in orchestra, there is thing called All-City and this is where we, like, it's like, students from all the junior highs. Normally, I play softball and I go to this thing, it's like kind of like church, but it's not a church, and it's like, we play games. In here, we got this thing called book time, and like you buy a book, you're in a certain program, like, I mean, trick and last year not actually the year before that I was in truth and train. . . . I have to go to orchestra in the morning because I play the cello.

Theo described participating in a youth afterschool program and choir, but noted the difficulties with keeping the choir participation. First, he described the Teen Reach program, which was perceived very helpful in terms of getting his homework done.

I used to go to this program called Teen Reach for teenagers and stuff to go to and like after school, we do our homework and stuff. They kind of like discuss about our life and all that types of stuff, stuff like that and basically, like, help me be more educated because they do educate things and build me up to become a better

person. I learn more things and I just bring it to school as we go by and we go do stuff like that.

Although participation in extra-curricular activities may serve to increase student engagement, Theo felt he had to stop participating in choir due to the affect on grades in that it was taking too much of his time. He stated:

Earlier in the year, I was in choir but I feel like that was kind of affected my grades a little bit, like, it's kind of wasting time, like, each time I want to do, but then something that I need to do [comes up], so I just had to drop choir and focus on my work and I had to go back, because tenth period is study hour and most of the time we have another work and I need to go to tenth hour and try to get at least some work done. So I will have some work when I get home, so I had to drop the choir because that's the tenth period so I had to drop it.

From the afterschool environment, the students must enter into the surrounding neighborhood environment in which their home and school reside. The school environment is really just a segment of this larger neighborhood and community. Therefore, the discussion turns to the larger neighborhood and community involvement in academic achievement.

### **Neighborhood and Community Influence**

A fourth thematic category was revealed from the analysis of the interview data. This category, neighborhood and community influences, demonstrated factors and involvement in the neighborhood and community that were perceived to contribute to or discourage the students' motivation and success. Key common responses included contributing factors of the opinions of family and neighbors on the students' academic successes, church or religious involvement, having a quiet neighborhood, not wanting to end up like some people in the neighborhood, emulating positive examples in the community, and community service involvement and helping others.

Table 14

*Neighborhood and Community Influence*

Invariant constituent	Number of participants to note this
Factors in neighborhood that contribute to success or motivate you	
Extended family & neighborhood support academic success of students	5
Church involvement	5
Quiet neighborhood	4
Not wanting to be like some people; not want to live in this neighborhood	3
Positive examples in the community	2
Community service involvement and helping others	2
Factors in neighborhood that discourage from academic success	
No friends in neighborhood; friends moved away	2
Violence, generating fear	2
Bad attitudes; bullying	1
People causing trouble	1
Have to think about protecting myself at all times	1

The student participants reported a feeling of family and neighbors in the community being happy and proud of them for their academic achievements. For example, Anita noted, “They are really happy for me, like, they say, like, congratulations, and they say, oh you do so good and stuff.” Similarly, Arie described that “Everybody just praises me and just like, oh wow, that’s you need to keep that up and because this is normal for me, so they just feel that it was not anything that was going to stop me from doing.” In addition, Theo described a similar notion of positive reinforcement by the neighborhood community. He stated, “They think that’s awesome, cool to be to be a



young African-American man achieving goals that like a worthy person would do that a worthy person does.”

Church involvement was another factor that was seen as contributing to the success of these student participants. For example, Anita explained how her church experiences shaped her success:

Because I know well going to church is like, I don't do bad things kind of because it's like, I know what the consequences are when I do bad things, so like bad choices lead to consequences and I don't like to get in trouble. So going to church like influences me to know that what we do at church, what we like learn at church [helps] in school.

Theo also agreed with the positive influence of church and or religious involvement. He explained:

God and stuff they like encourage us to be good in school, they give rewards for being good in school, they assess what grades we get in what grade we have over the years you know stuff like that but see as we as what they preaching, preaching to us about is it helping us and motivating us to be successful outside of church.

Four participants described their neighborhoods as quiet, which was felt to contribute to their academic success as well. Anita noted, “It's quiet, it's not like one of those neighborhoods we don't know, because there has been a shooting and something like we don't do that and it's really just quiet.” Brian agreed describing that his neighborhood “is quiet and like we have a lot of space in our neighborhood.”

Another factor that was seen as supporting the students' achievement was actually a negative for the neighborhood, which was people in the neighborhood that are jobless, homeless, untrained, or very poor. These people served as an example of what the students did not want to be, therefore, serving to support their continued word toward achievement. Anita described:

Well in my neighborhood well there are so many people in my neighborhood that they are, they act like they haven't been trained, like they had no home training and that contributes to me even academically successful because I push myself so I say to myself, I don't want to end up like that. So I strive harder so I don't end up like those people. And I don't, I never want to be like some person that's like that. So I try my hardest, so I won't end up like that.

Brian agreed with this thought, reflecting on kids his age who are on a bad path and not wanting to be like them. He explained:

I see kids that's my age they are not at school because they are doing drugs and stuff and I really don't want to do that because I really know that I am not going to be nothing in my life if I do that. So that helps me understand that if you do what they are doing you are not going to achieve goals.

As a more positive example, Draya described seeing other people helping others as a motivation to be a good student. She said, "Sometimes, I see people helping other people and...that makes me want be a good student because you got to start [with] being a good person [before being a good student]."

This section has presented the findings highlighting the common responses of participants. These common responses are used later, in conjunction with the individual textural-structural descriptions, to generate the composite structural description, which provides the conclusions of the analysis. The next section offers the individual participant textural-structural descriptions.

### **Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions**

#### **Structural Description for Participant 1: Anita**

Anita perceived herself as a high achiever, working on everything to the best of her ability, always turning her work in, and just doing her best. She is a student athlete, whose goal is to go to college and then become a nurse. Anita experienced the death of her grandfather, which she found was difficult, but not impossible to push through. Anita

described the positive influence of her mother, whom she sees as a role model because she perceived her to be a good person, intelligent, and she felt that her mother has given help to people along the way. Her friends were supportive, helping each other and influencing each others' achievements. Church involvement has been a constructive and motivating neighborhood factor for Anita.

School is important to Anita, as she expressed that it is important to get an education and go to college. This is especially important to Anita, as none of her family has ever gone to college before. If school were not required, Anita says she would attend anyway, because she loves school and values education. The only thing she does not like about school is that she gets bullied.

The one thing I don't like about school is the kids, the people not the teacher but the people I go with because they talk about me a whole lot and I get bullied but no one does anything about it. So I have to just deal with it.

Anita is also the participant who noted the racial differences and tension between the Academy students and the non-Academy students. Anita plays sports and is active in the school and community.

Anita described her home life as split between her father (in the summer) and her mother for the rest of the year. She finds her younger sister distracting to her work and although the family has two computers, neither was working at the time of the interview, which presented difficulty for completing required schoolwork. Anita's mother puts a strong emphasis on education and Anita is usually rewarded in some way when her grades are good. She described her neighborhood as quiet with a lot of family in the neighborhood.

**Structural Description for Participant 2: Arie**

Arie described herself as “very academically determined,” such that she always tries her best. She claims to never make excuses for incomplete work. Arie says she will always take the time to get it in. She believes students have to take chances academically and in high school. In the future, Arie wants to graduate from high school and go to college, ultimately to become a great lawyer. Arie reported incidences in elementary school of teachers not treating her fairly, demonstrating segregation in the classroom and students not truly working together.

Arie reported looking up to her mother as a role model, because she is successful and able to support and provide for the family. Arie also reported the important influence and help that she received from friends. Arie felt education is important as it represents an exit. She participates actively in afterschool programming. She also described the support and assistance received from other students.

Arie did not apply to the Academy, because she felt there was a social superiority that was projected from the Academy students, which may have contributed to her perception of racism at the school. Arie participated in extracurricular activities, including a community service group in addition to school activities, like sports. She reported enjoying the communication and learning that goes on at school between teachers and students as well as between peers. Arie says that her close friends are academically successful and the relationships with them supports their mutual success, as they influenced each other positively. She did not like or felt that not having her father with them hurt her progress, as he lived in another state.

In terms of the home neighborhood, Arie noted the benefits of the quiet part of her neighborhood, but also described problems with gang violence, which posed a challenge for her success due to fear of safety. She felt no one in the neighborhood knew of her achievements, because her neighborhood is a more dangerous and therefore, closed off atmosphere for residents living there. Finally, although able to study at home, she does not have a computer at home.

### **Structural Description for Participant 3: Brian**

Brian identified himself as a high achiever, believing himself to be “smart, intelligent” and kind of shy, but one who sets his goals high in order to achieve what he wants to be. He says that to stay a high achiever, he works hard and stays focused on what he has to do, and studies a great deal.

Brian participates in sports, with a keen enjoyment for wrestling, which he hoped to pursue further in high school, college, and beyond. He felt his family has an impact on his academic success by helping him with his work, particularly, his grandmother, who teaches him things on the computer. He described looking up to his father as a role model, who he felt was successful and who also helped him to be successful.

Brian explained that sometimes peers try to talk him into doing something that is wrong, but that he is able to just walk away and “stay out of trouble” because of the knowledge that it would be a bad choice to go along with the suggestions. Brian noted that the poor choices of other peers that have influenced him to not follow that direction, because he understands that the path they have taken does not lead to achievement of goals. Brian explained:

I see kids that’s my age they are not at school because they are doing drugs and stuff and I really don’t want to do that because I really know that I am going to be

nothing in my life if I do that. So that helps me understand that if you do what they are doing, you are not going to achieve goals.

In addition, Brian expressed the belief that his involvement with church and religion has helped him to form the beliefs that support more positive and constructive behaviors.

Brian credits his mother with his success in that she does not allow him to fail, while also supporting him with assistance, encouragement, and teaching him to be a good student.

He described himself as a person who likes to learn and therefore, would come to school even if it were not required. He demonstrates strong engagement with participation in extra-curricular activities as well. In addition to sports, Brian used to participate in the choir; however, he noted that he stopped this participation due to the fact that he thought the activity was effecting his grades. Choir was scheduled during the same time as study hall, which prevented him from being able to complete his homework at school. He describes no problems with peers or racial conflicts in school.

Relationships with teachers were also described as good. He did not want to be part of the Academy program due to his perception of the stigma for participating; he explained that the students in the program feel like they are smarter than other people. He does not want people to think that of him and he does not want others to think they are not smart.

In terms of home life, Brian has stayed in the same home, and lives with his mom, grandmother, and siblings. His dad graduated from college, but does not live with them. His grandmother contributes to his learning, as she helps him learn computer skills. He is able to study at home in his room and has a computer available to do the work, although younger siblings were reportedly a distraction. Brian described his neighborhood as quiet and having a lot of space. However, he also noted that they live near a fire station and that the sirens sometimes keep him up. In addition to sports, Brian participated in a

community afterschool program, which he felt was very beneficial in terms of getting his school work done and even providing tutors if needed.

#### **Structural Description for Participant 4: Draya**

Draya, like the other participants, described herself as a high achiever, which she believed means that you “try your hardest and work to your best.” She claimed to be a quick learner or “easy learner,” which perhaps makes the achievement a little easier. Her goals for the future include heading to high school, going to college, and becoming a veterinarian. She is able to keep her grades high by turning her work in on time and doing all the work and classwork that is asked of her. Draya asserted that her family contributes positively to her achievement, especially her mother, who helps with homework and is involved at the school. She views her mother as a role model and someone she aspires to be like. This was reportedly due to the fact that she is the “main person” in her life, but also that she has been successful, “doing well in life.” Obstacles to her achievement stemming from the family were described as “funerals,” indicating the negative effects of family members’ passing, though she did not elaborate on these deaths in the family.

The roles of other significant people in her life have contributed to her success. Her experiences with teachers included those who offered assistance when needed and there were no instances of racism from teachers.

Draya describes being able to walk away from trouble and avoiding getting involved. At the same time, her friendships have been supportive of achievement, as she described mutual academic success among her friends and helpful relationships in which they help each other and influence each other positively. Doing her homework

consistently and studying with friends she saw as the primary reasons for her success in school. Draya described her neighborhood as dangerous, with violence problems, which at times hinder her achievement because she does not always feel safe; however, she also described people in her neighborhood helping others, which helped to motivate her achievement.

Despite these difficulties, she remains on task, focused, and engaged in school through staying organized and scheduled. She participates in sports and orchestra. She described strong relationships with friends and relationships with other peers that reflect a cordial nature, and reported no sense of racial tension. Her friendships tended to be with others who were high achievers and she described a positive, competitiveness among her friends. This healthy competition served to motivate further achievement. She felt the other peers respected her for her academic achievement. Relationships with teachers were reportedly fine with no issues. Teachers highlighted her achievement and offered rewards and praise for her hard work.

Her mother was described as putting a strong value on education and having the desire for her daughter to achieve more than she did. No one in her family has attended college. Draya reported her family as helpful with her needs and also encouraging to keep her achievement level high. She has had some transitional home experiences, sometimes having to stay with her aunt and cousins. She reports being able to study at home, but can be distracted by fighting or arguing between her mother and uncle in particular. Her friends have all moved out of the neighborhood, so the lack of friends in the vicinity was described as discouraging. However, she is able to maintain friendships at school.



### **Structural Description for Participant 5: Jaylen**

Jaylen describes himself as someone who works hard to do what he needs to do and continuously tries to do better, which he believes defines him as a high achiever. He described paying attention, listening to teachers, doing the homework, studying as much as possible, and staying out of trouble as the ways to maintain his academic excellence and achieve his goals. Jaylen's goals include finishing high school, going to college, playing sports in college, and ultimately becoming a mechanical engineer.

Jaylen felt his family was critical to his academic achievement success. They provided support in the form of ensuring that his work was getting done and checking his "plan" to see how he was doing in school and if there were any problems. In particular, he noted that his mother checks on him continually, which motivates him to keep his grades high. The only challenges to his achievement noted were the passing of his grandparents, which he described as a general period of struggle emotionally and academically. According to Jaylen, his teachers have kept him in line, keeping him out of trouble and paying attention to him when he steps out of line to bring him back. He did not notice any different treatment among teachers for students. Jaylen claimed to hold his Uncle Jim as a role model because he looks after him and is always trying to help. Jaylen sees his uncle as a good person.

Jaylen explained that, for the most part, he is able to stay out of trouble, but that sometimes, if his friends are involved, it is hard to walk away. He described:

When there is a lot of people in a crowd, I sort of walk away but I, if it's a lot of my friends I stay there sometimes and then like if there is nobody I get along where I just walk away from them.

He admitted, however, that more often, his friends contribute to his success by keeping him out of trouble and discouraging his involvement in trouble. He described having both high achieving friends and friends who are not focused on achievement. Jaylen said that his neighborhood did not influence his behavior, either positively or negatively.

Jaylen's experiences in school and engagement include extra-curricular activities. He enjoys participation in sports and also is involved in music (playing the drums) on his own, outside of school. He described both positive and negative peer relationships, with some instances of teasing or bullying at school. However, he did not report any racial tensions or differences among the students. His close friends were described as high achievers, who he felt made him want to be better. Jaylen had no interest in joining the Academy, despite that some of his friends are in the program. He discussed the amount of work and perceived stress in the program and he felt this would not be fun.

In terms of family life, Jaylen described strong, positive relationships within the family. Neither of his parents attended college, but they continue to place a high value on education, hoping that he will do better than they have done. His mother was reportedly very helpful with work and supporting his achievement and he reported being given rewards such as going out to eat for his achievement. However, he has experienced some home shifting, having to stay with his grandmother sometimes. He is able to study at home, usually in his room, but can be distracted by his dogs or younger siblings. Jaylen described liking his neighborhood because it tends to be quiet, but similar to Draya, remarked about the lack of friends in the neighborhood.

### **Structural Description for Participant 6: Theo**

Like the other participants, Theo described himself as a high achiever. For him, this meant that he sets high goals for himself and expects to achieve those goals. Theo described studying hard as the reason for his success and that he starts with the basic skills academically and builds on those basic math and reading skills. He wants to go to high school, play sports in high school, and go to college. He hopes to maybe become a professional basketball player or to become a professional in a good career, perhaps with the FBI. To accomplish these goals, he plans to continue to work hard, study hard, avoid negative influences, and be at school every day.

In terms of role models, Theo described seeing the assistant principal as a role model for him. This is because assistant principal is a successful African American man and Theo thinks that he has a unique way of motivating him to continue to achieve. He did not feel that his family had a significant contribution to his achievement and also felt that the difficult and negative atmosphere of the neighborhood served to discourage and hinder him. He lives with his grandmother as a result of parental separation and his father being incarcerated. At the same time, he credits some of his teachers with providing the skills and motivation to excel. He described having high achieving friends, but some who are behaviorally good and some who are not very good behaviors. He did note some racial tensions between students. He also described African American students as arguing more compared to the White students.

Despite the negatives in his “bad” neighborhood, he has found motivation in seeing what he does not want for his life. He noted:

I look on the street and I see people like, like homeless on the street and stuff and they got no jobs stuff I’ll say like, if I don’t, if I don’t take advantage of my

education and what I got to do now this is what I'm going to be like in the future, so based on that I think to myself like is this what I want to be, I ask myself is this what I want to be or do I want to be successful and drive in cars and get a job because I'm going to go to college, then I would like, I want to go to college and stuff so I just keep doing what I got to do and stay concentrated and tell them what I'm doing whether I'm doing wrong in school.

In the home environment, he is able to study, although he is distracted by others easily; he has computers available to use. He has moved around between family members since the separation of his parents. He gets positive encouragement from the neighborhood in terms of others who know he does well in school. According to Theo, "They think that's awesome, cool to be to be a young African American man achieving goals that like a worthy person would do that a worthy person does."

### **Structural Composite Descriptions**

This section identifies and describes the composite structural descriptions that were developed from the individual structural descriptions and the thematic categories of the previous sections (Moustakas, 1994). These composite descriptions describe how the participants perceived the essence of their experiences as a group, allowing for greater understanding of how they were able to maintain their academic achievement despite disadvantages and challenges that exist in an impoverished community. The concluding themes and corresponding experiences provide the overall conclusions of the data analysis and therefore, these overarching themes are used to address the research questions of the study.

**Theme 1: High achievement through perceived determination manifest in working hard toward one's best performance, remaining focused on what is productive and**

**avoiding common obstacles to achievement (“staying out of trouble”) and having a positive attitude toward school .**

All of the participants in this study perceived themselves to be high achievers. Their personal definitions of what it means to be a high achiever varied somewhat, but in general took the form of determination, which inspired them to work hard, remain focused, and perform one’s best. At the same time, the participants described avoiding negative influences and having a generally positive attitude toward school, which allowed them to perform toward their goals.

**Theme 2: Identified and clear future goals and aspirations toward college and a professional career.**

Each of the participants also described clear goals for the future, which commonly included attending college and ultimately attaining a professional career. These careers varied by student, but the goals were clear and focused. Despite limited family experiences with college, all the participants planned to attend college.

**Theme 3. Academic and emotional assistance received from teachers, family (particularly mother), and friends.**

The participants described the people who have helped them along the way to stay on track and maintain a high level of achievement in school. These influences included family, teachers, and friends. In terms of the family, the mother was most often noted as the primary influence and person who assisted in their personal development. The students described friendships with other high achieving students, in relationships that served to support their academic success and mutually influence and help one another. Middle school teachers had an expected strong role in the academic development of the

students, who reportedly were available to extra help, kept the students in line, and kept them out of trouble. However, one participant shared an experience about her elementary teacher who was perceived as racist.

**Theme 4. Mothers (and other adults) serve as role models of hard work, success, entrepreneurial attitude and trying to be a help to others.**

Related to the previous theme of individuals serving to assist in the academic development of the students, this theme reflects the specified role models for these students in terms of who they look up to and aspire to be like. The most common response among the variety of responses, was that of their mother (3 participants). The students chose their mothers as role models due to the students' perceptions that their mothers worked hard, had success and showed the positive and entrepreneurial attitude that has contributed to their personal success. In addition, they were seen as people who helped others, which was also admired.

**Theme 5. Family and home factors contributing to success of mothers help, ability to study at home, and positive encouragement and support, whereas hindrances include household distractions, death in the family (or other family trauma), lack of available home computer, parental separation and resulting housing issues.**

Several family and home factors were noted by all six of the participants to contribute or hinder their motivation and success. Contributing factors included their mother's assistance (2 participants), the ability to study at home (6 participants), and the general positive encouragement and support from family, teachers, and friends (6 participants). Challenges mentioned by the participants included household distractions (younger siblings, arguing, etc.) (6 participants), experiences of death in the family or

other type of significant trauma (3 participants), the lack of availability of a home computer (2 participants), parental separation, and the issues related to the parental separation (3 participants).

**Theme 6. Successful friendship and positive peer relations, but limited relations with other peers with the existence of both positive and negative experiences with other peers.**

Participants in this study described a theme of strong, positive friendship relationships with peers that shared their academic drive for excellence. These relationships provided encouragement, academic support, and positive reinforcement to avoid negative influences. However, participants also noted limited interactions with other peers. Some instances of bullying and extremely negative experiences with other peers (noted by 2 participants), which represented a powerful negative influence were evident. On the more positive side, other peer relationships were cordial or even admiring of the students' achievements.

**Theme 7. Racial and Academy program conflicts between students, sometimes between teachers and students.**

Racial tensions were expressed by two participants, but not the majority. These White/Black racial tensions seemed to also tie into the racial makeup of the Academy program, noting that the students in the Academy tended to be White, while the non-Academy students were primarily African American. Confounding this issue was the sense that the Academy students who were White and African American presented themselves as better and smarter than the other students, a sentiment that was strong enough for several of the participants in this study to avoid participation in that program

so that they would not be thought of in that light. The question stemming from this finding is whether the racial conflict supports the Academy student mentality or whether the mentality of superiority feeds the racial tensions.

**Theme 8. Positive feedback and helpful and strong student-teacher relationships and rewards for work well done support the perceived importance of education.**

Teachers were revealed to have a critical influence on the motivation and achievement of all six of the participants in this study. Strong student-teacher relationships and rewards were evident among these students for work that was well done. The teachers were perceived to provide positive feedback, helping the students to feel successful, and to realize the importance of education.

**Theme 9 Positive neighborhood influences of family and neighbor support, church involvement, having a quiet neighborhood, observing good examples of service and helping others.**

The neighborhood influences described by all six of the participants in the study provided positive encouragement, motivation, and support for their academic achievement. Factors associated with family, friends and neighbor support, and church involvement served to support the students on this community level of influence. In addition, some students noted the positive of having a quiet neighborhood in which the students were able to observe good examples of service to others, which supported their personal beliefs in the importance of helping others, and how their own success can help them to make the world a better place.

**Theme 10. Perceived negative influence of not having friends in the neighborhood and violence and general fear in the neighborhood.**



Neighborhood level influences, for three participants, also provided negative influences. These factors included not having friends in the neighborhood, which seemed to reflect less of a community tie to the neighborhood, as well as violence. The violence and gang activities were described as generating fear in the neighborhood, contributing to lack of sense of community, which in the previous theme, served to support the students' motivation and goals.

**Data analysis summary.** In this chapter, I have presented the results of the study obtained from interview data of six African American students enrolled in an economically depressed area school that has 75% of the students in the district receiving free or reduced price meals. The interviews were used to explore and understand the experiences and perceptions of these students in terms of their continued academic achievement and factors that may affect that success. Chapter Four reviewed the research questions and detailed the data collection and analysis procedures. Analysis of the interview data generated thematic categories, individual textural and structural descriptions of participants, and composite structural description, which represented the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants relevant to the research questions of the study, as revealed from the data. Themes suggest the meaning and essence of the data for the participants as a whole. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings within the context of the research questions and of the data presented in chapter 4. In addition, chapter 5 provides recommendations for future research.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

This final chapter is divided into three sections. The first section contains a summary of the findings of the research. In this section, the issues that emerged in the study are connected to those discussed in Chapter Two, the review of the related literature. The second section identifies implications for educational practice that emerged from the results of the study. The third section provides a conclusion of the study and the fourth and final section presents recommendations for future research.

### Summary of Findings

**Research question.** What are the experiences of economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students who excel academically despite the circumstances that are generally associated with low achievement?

The findings of this over-arching research question are found in each of the four secondary questions listed below.

**Secondary question #1.** What has contributed to these students' academic success?

All six participants perceived being a high achiever meant trying their hardest, turning in quality work to the best of their ability, and expecting more of themselves. These findings are consistent with Harris (2006), whose research suggested that researchers and policy makers should re-evaluate the extent to which they connect African American students' low academic achievement to their low levels of desire for success. Harris (2006) stated, "Evidence suggests black youths want to learn, they simply are not acquiring the skills necessary for academic success" (p. 827). Participants also described themselves as being academically determined, staying focused, and

maintaining a value of school. These perceptions reflect the findings of Whiting (2006) who included the need for achievement as one of his scholar identities. Whiting suggested, “These people desire to do well and consistently try to figure out ways to do their work better” (p. 225).

Participants shared their belief in their intelligence as a reason for their academic success, which is consistent with the theory of self-efficacy (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Bandura, 1977; Jordan, 1981). Gutman and Midgley (2000) affirmed, “As our data indicate, poor African American students with greater sense of confidence in their ability to master academic tasks may not experience the magnitude of decline in academic achievement typically associated with middle school transition” (p. 10).

Participant responses about the importance of staying out of trouble supported Carter’s (2006) cultural straddler approach, which consists of students who “value and embrace skills to participate in multiple cultural environments, including mainstream society, their school environments, and their respective ethnoracial communities” (p. 306).

All participants discussed their short and long-term goals, many of which included attending and completing high school, playing sports in high school or at the college level, and attending college in order to acquire a professional career. The fact that all participants were goal oriented mirrors Duckworth’s et al. (2007) view of the impact that grit and perseverance have on accomplishing long-term goals.

Participants also shared the influence teachers, friends, and family have had on their academic development. Most participants indicated that their mother serves as their role model and provides them with assistance to ensure they are academically successful.

This is consistent with Sampson (2002) who identified the parents of average and high achievers as being supportive of their child's schoolwork.

**Secondary question #2.** What challenges have these students experienced as African American, middle school students living in a low-income community?

Very few participants experienced instances of bullying or extremely negative encounters with peers who attend their school, but are not considered to be close friends. The few participants who have had these encounters can be associated with the middle school adversity that Gutman and Midgley (2000) spoke about in regard to the early adolescent biological and physiological changes associated with puberty. Such changes often cause youth to engage in behaviors that are harmful to others, such as bullying (Gutman & Midgley, 2000).

Racial tensions at the school were expressed by two students, but four did not experience racial tension. These experiences were not associated with their teachers, but seemed to be connected to the Academy program, in which students tended to be White, while the students who attended the same school but were not apart of the Academy program were predominately African American and Latino. According to the participants, this conflict stems from the Academy students presenting themselves as being better or smarter than the other students. This does not seem to hinder the participants from being academically successful, as they did not associate race with academic achievement. Furthermore, this finding refutes Thernstrom and Thernstrom's (2003) belief that "when it comes to academic success, members of some ethnic and racial groups are culturally luckier than others" (p. 4).

The participants discussed challenges within family and home factors that varied between household distractions (younger siblings, arguing, etc.), experiences of death in the family, periods of homelessness, difficulties with parental separation, and living with extended family. These findings support Wilson's (1990) research that explored the environmental and social pressures many economically disadvantaged, African American students are forced to experience in addition to the biological, physical, and social transformations that accompany early adolescence.

The interview data also revealed perceived negative influences of the community that consisted of violence in the neighborhood, some participants not having friends who live close by, and a general fear of living in the neighborhood. The findings are in accordance with the risk factors Gutman et al. (2002) claimed to be associated with economically disadvantaged middle school students, but the participants' academic success was not consistent with their view that the various risk factors "place African American children at risk for less than optimal development" (Gutman et al., 2002).

**Secondary question #3.** How do these students make meaning of their academic lives in the school setting?

The findings show that peer influences have a significant impact on the participants' academic achievement. All six participants shared that they have established friendships with students who tend to stay out of trouble and those who are also academically successful. Most of the participants discussed that their peers support their achievement by providing help with difficult work and serving as a motivator to continue to work hard as they engage in healthy competition. This finding refutes Kunjufu (1988) who believed, "Higher achievers also suffer from this silent killer, while

their scores are better than those of their peers, they could be higher if many of them did not have to demonstrate loyalty to their peers” (p. 35).

The interview data also revealed that most of the participants’ peers who attend their school and are not considered close friends look up to their academic achievement. Four participants have not experienced any difficulties with bullying or teasing from these students due to their academic success. This finding contradicts that of Ogbu’s (1985) acting White theory and supports the idea that this theory is irrelevant in regard to providing an explanation for the cause of the achievement gap (Toldson & Owens, 2010). The only racial conflict that was identified by two participants was the fact that although they met the academic criteria to be admitted into the Academy program, the participants did not apply because the Academy program consists of primarily White students who believe they are smarter than others and the participants perceived that the program carries the aura of superiority. This resistance to being connected to superiority could also be associated with Carter’s (2006) cultural straddler approach that maintains academically successful African American students are able to balance the relationships with their ethnic peer groups while being successful within the school environment. Furthermore, in the minds of the participants, because of the stigma the Academy program holds, attending this program could possibly put a wedge between them and the rest of the African-American student population at the school because Academy students often look down on students who are not in the program. This would place the participants in an awkward position with other African American students at the school.

Participants also identified teacher emotional and academic support as having a positive impact on their academic achievement. In particular, participants noted that their

teachers' positive feedback and motivation supported their achievement. This finding supports Tyler and Boelter's (2008) study that revealed a student's perception of their teacher's expectations is connected to their self-efficacy or competence and has a positive impact on their academic performance.

All six participants were involved in an extra-curricular activity at school that consisted of a type of sport or music program. This is consistent with Sampson (2002), whose findings ascertained, "The involvement in extracurricular activities, common to all of the average achievers and three of the five high achievers, helps them to develop leadership abilities, discipline, self-control, and cooperation, all of which help in school achievement" (pp. 183-184).

**Secondary question #4.** How do these students' home and community experiences impact their academic achievement?

Many of the participants' parents did not attend or complete college, but all of their mothers placed a strong sense of value on education, often providing rewards for their academic achievement. According to the participants, their mothers showed support for their education by helping with homework and having confidence in the participants' ability to be academically successful. These findings conflict with Ford's (1996) belief that a child's education is not a high priority of parents living in poverty and the low educational level of the mother leads to minimal knowledge and less interaction with the school.

Although four participants reported to have good relationships with their family, there were some events or circumstances in the participants' family life that were identified as disruptive to the achievement process. These included deaths in the family,

period of homelessness, difficulties with parents (divorce), and having to stay with extended family. For the most part, the participants are able to study at home, but each of them mentioned some form of household distraction that mostly consisted of younger sibling(s) interfering with their studying. The interview data revealed that most students did not allow these hindrances to prevent them from achieving. They remained focused and continued to complete the required work. The participants indicated that despite their adversity, they keep “pushing through it.” This quality identifies them as being resilient, which has been explored in a great deal of research. (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Herbert, 1993; Masten et al., 1999; Sampson, 2002).

All six participants are responsible for household chores or duties. However, most of them spend their free time watching television at home or spending time with friends outside of the home. When the participants discussed the neighborhood and community influence on their academic achievement, although four of the participants identified their neighborhood as quiet and that neighborhood supports their academic success, half of the participants did not want to be like some of the people who live in their neighborhood. This is consistent with Wilson’s (1990) stance that many economically disadvantaged, African American students are forced to deal with environmental and social pressures that are associated with living in poverty, such as crime, violence, teen pregnancy, etc. However, the participants have chosen to avoid these environmental distractions and take a different route.

The interview data revealed some positive aspects of the participants’ neighborhood that consisted of neighbors participating in community service and helping others. In addition, most participants mentioned being involved in some form of church



or religious activities that help them to be a better student. This finding supports the work of Williams et al. (2002), which determined church attendance to be significant in predicting positive academic outcomes.

### **Implications for Educational Practice**

The findings of this study suggest that all six participants shared a value for education and had a positive attitude towards school. They maintained their high achievement by being determined to work hard toward their best performance, remaining focused on productive activities, and avoiding trouble. As Riggs and Gholar (2009) emphasized the importance of students possessing conative intelligence and having the inner will to learn and to succeed, they provide evidence that school programs should focus on establishing these qualities in all students. The literature suggests that if a student has an inner will to achieve, no challenge or obstacle will interfere with the student's success. The participants have reported on their inner will to achieve by discussing the significance of maintaining their academic performance through various home, school, and community challenges. Furthermore, it is important that schools not only teach students what they need to know in order to learn, but also find ways to establish students' desire to learn. This quality will give students who encounter adversity the power to remain focused on their education and not falter as they continue to strive toward accomplishing their goals.

Schools should consider implementing a Character Education program that specifically teaches students the importance of possessing the inner will to achieve. This program should include a variety of lessons teachers and school counselors/social workers can utilize within the classroom. Possessing the inner will to achieve should also

be extended to school-wide assemblies in which guest speakers are invited to share their inner will experiences. This study reveals that having the inner will to achieve is just as important as achieving good grades. Furthermore, through professional development training, principals should ensure that all teachers and counselors/social workers embrace the importance of establishing an inner will to achieve within their classroom, as it should go hand and hand with teaching reading and mathematics.

The six participants also identified clear future goals and aspirations toward college and a professional career. Although the participants were in middle school and most would be the first in their family to attend college, each participant was sure they would attend college to pursue a future career. Their perseverance and passion for these long-term goals reflects the research Duckworth et al. (2007) on grit and goal achievement. These participants possessed grit because they established long-term goals and despite their challenges, they were determined to do what it takes to reach their goals.

It is important that middle schools provide opportunities for students to experience school-wide goal setting and goal setting within their classrooms. This will inspire students to begin setting personal goals that will influence their future. Teachers should also share with students, strategies that will keep them on the right track in pursuit of their goals when they encounter challenges. Classroom activities should reflect opportunities for students to establish future goals and identify the steps they will take to meet their goals. Throughout these lessons, teachers should assist students with identifying strategies to achieve their future goals. Teachers should also expand student awareness of various higher-level institutions and career opportunities through classroom

activities that expose students to undergraduate majors and the subject areas that are necessary for the area of study.

The participants in this study described their support system to include the influences of family, teachers, and friends. Although five of the participants' mothers did not attend college, the participants chose their mother as a role model due to their hard work and their desire to help others. The two qualities in which the participants admired about their mothers are evident in their work ethic at school. Despite the research by Ford (1996), which suggested that one of the factors for students to be academically successful is the educational level of the mother, these participants admired other qualities about their mother that have influenced their academic achievement. It is imperative that schools foster partnerships with parents that support the student's academic achievement, as parents have a strong influence on their children. The partnership that is formed between parents and the school should reflect opportunities for both shareholders to support the other in the mission of student academic success.

School districts should allocate funding for a coordinator to provide parental involvement opportunities at each school. This position should entail providing parent sessions that include training on how to assist children at home with academic, emotional, and social support. The coordinator would also be responsible for creating activities for all parents to take part in their child's learning during the school day. In addition, the coordinator would be in charge of keeping the lines of communication open between home and school.

This study found that when working with economically disadvantaged, African American students, it is essential for teachers to establish positive relationships, hold high

expectations, and provide rewards for work well done. The middle school teachers of the participants in this study provided positive feedback to students, helped students to feel successful, and instilled the importance of education. In addition, teachers were available to students when they needed extra help, kept students on the right track in terms of their academic performance, and helped them to avoid trouble that could interfere with their academic performance. This is consistent with the work of Steel (1992), who recognized the importance of the student-teacher relationship when providing support systems for economically disadvantaged, African American students.

Teachers must understand that what they do can make a difference in a child's life. It is important for teachers to establish relationships with students that cultivate caring, nurture a sense of competence, and foster empowerment. Teachers can make these connections by getting to know their students and the lives they live while sharing their own experiences with students. Teachers should also empower students to become more self-directed so they are able to take responsibility for their learning. Although teachers should make sure students are making academic progress by monitoring their growth and providing immediate feedback, teachers should also make an assertive effort to instill the importance of education in students by building a sense of responsibility in students to work harder to achieve their goals. Teachers should provide time in their schedule to allow students to think about what they want to do in life, set goals for themselves, and discover ways to keep sight of these goals. Students need to understand the connection between accomplishing their future goals and preparing themselves for their future by studying hard. Lastly, teachers should model and demonstrate a love of

learning daily. Students should be taught to excel within the educational setting, which will transfer to their everyday lives and future educational experiences.

This study also revealed that teachers should never lower their expectations of economically disadvantaged, African American students because of their background, where they live, or educational level of their parents. It is important that principals provide professional development for teachers that will help them learn techniques for establishing high expectations for African American students. Teachers must understand the importance of raising the bar for these students and providing the additional support that is necessary for many of these students to perform at the expected level. High expectations should be established from the very beginning. Teachers should assign challenging work while providing the scaffolding and feedback students need in order to be successful. There may be times when students fail to perform at the expected level, it then becomes the teacher's responsibility to re-teach when necessary and motivate students to persevere towards meeting the goal.

Peer relationships also have an enormous impact on a student's academic achievement. One aspect of the peer influence that all of the participants in this study had in common was that they surrounded themselves with peers who shared their academic drive for excellence. Although one participant had some friends who did not succeed academically, he did not allow their lack of achievement to affect his progress. The friendships the participants established provided encouragement, academic support, and positive reinforcement to avoid negative influences. Selecting friends with similar academic goals is one of the most important decisions an economically disadvantaged African American student can make especially when establishing peer relationships

during the middle school transition. Research has shown that this period in life can be extremely difficult for economically disadvantaged African American students (Burchinal et al., 2008; Gutman et al., 2002; Gutman & Midgley, 2000).

As a result of this finding, it is imperative that schools provide opportunities for economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students to establish positive relationships with academically successful students who can serve as an inspiration and support. Middle schools should establish partnerships with neighboring high schools to provide mentoring programs in which academically successful high school students form friendships and provide guidance to middle school students. This will offer economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students opportunities to bond with an older student from a similar background, who can serve as a positive influence on their academic performance. The mentoring program should establish times throughout the school year for the mentors and mentees to meet during various social activities. This will allow them to interact socially with each other, which can lead to establishing a relationship in which they can share their experiences and through this interaction mentors can provide motivation and support to mentees.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings from this study open up several areas for future research. Recommendations for future research that stem directly from this study should include employing this research design to the economically disadvantaged, Latino student population at the middle school level who are succeeding academically to explore their perceptions of their lived experiences and compare the similarities and differences between the African American population to inform educational practice.

The participants in this study were all well versed in what it means to be a high achiever, which expressed the importance for students to acquire the skills necessary for academic success. Because this study did not reveal how these students developed these skills, another area of future research might explore how academically successful students obtain the skills that allow them to perform at a high level.

Very little research has been conducted regarding the influence of conation on a student's academic achievement and how schools can help to develop the inner will to achieve in all students. More literature is needed to provide school practitioners with an understanding of the importance of a student's inner will to learn. Schools may have teachers with the best educational background and top-notch resources, but if their students are unable to cultivate their inner will to achieve, the instruction and resources will fail to improve academic achievement, especially when there are various challenges the students encounter. Moreover, additional research is needed in this area to help establish this quality in students who are failing academically and lack the will to achieve.

More research should explore the African American students who have adopted the cultural straddler approach as a means to being academically successful while remaining committed to who they are and their racial/ethnic culture. It is important that these students' stories are shared in order to explore the qualities, behaviors, and character traits that were acquired and how these skills influenced their academic achievement.

Finally, additional research might be explored regarding the perceptions of the value of education held by African American parents, particularly the African American

mother and its effects on the academic performance of their children. This literature would reveal the level of a parent's influence on student achievement in an effort to provide society with more insight into effective parenting practices that connect to a student's academic achievement. In addition, this research could provide schools with additional strategies to share with parents when working together in partners of learning.

### **Conclusion**

The problem is clear; African Americans continue to be the lowest achieving students in the United States. In general, the academic achievement of African American students is lower than any other race of students. However, research shows that much of the decline for African American students occurs during the middle school transition where various challenges emerge and life choices are decided. This study explored the home, school, and community experiences of six, economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students to aid society in closing the achievement gap that persists.

A great deal of research has been conducted regarding the plight of the African American students and the literature review highlighted the influence of the black peer group, the acting White theory, and dominant society, as various factors along with socio-economic-status and the breakdown in family structure. Although understanding the challenges that exist for economically disadvantaged, African American students was necessary for this study, it was equally important to present research that reflected the African American students who are achieving academically despite their circumstances. Therefore, the literature review captured a variety of research that supports the factors that contribute to the high academic achievement of these students. From culturally



relevant education, to self-efficacy, support systems, teacher expectations, resilience, cultural straddling, religious beliefs, and the inner will to achieve, all of which have proven to be successful for African American students.

The phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory is the theoretical framework that was implemented in this study to address how the six participants made meaning of their experiences through the four research questions that were identified to guide the study. Reoccurring themes were discovered through the analysis of various interviews of the participants to produce the factors that contributed to these students' academic success despite the challenges they had to overcome.

The findings of this study revealed that the six participants held a strong value for education, which was instilled by their mothers, teachers, and peers. They possessed an inner will to achieve that allowed them to maintain their academic achievement throughout the challenges they faced at school and within their home and the community. In addition, each of the participants in this study established future goals and aspirations for themselves that included attending college in pursuit of a professional career. The participants believed that if they continued to work hard and perform at their best level, they would reach these long-term goals. This study revealed the importance of the parental, teacher, and peer support on a student's academic achievement and how these support systems form as stakeholders in a student's academic performance. Despite the negative influences of the neighborhood in which many of the participants lived, they stayed out of trouble and remained focused on obtaining an education that would prevent them from experiencing a life similar to some of the individuals who live in their community.

Exploring the participants' experiences in this study helped to address the inadequate amount of research devoted to the triumphs of economically disadvantaged, African American students who have defeated the odds. One way to reverse the low academic achievement of these students is to embrace the actions of other African American students who have overcome their challenges and are excelling academically. This study not only provided helpful information for other economically disadvantaged, African American students, but also provided information for their families, and the low-achieving schools many of them attend. Through the investigation of the participants' home, school, and community experiences, this study added to a body of literature that seeks to provide educational practitioners with strategies to close the achievement gap that continues to exist. This study supported current literature that suggests the importance of self-efficacy, resilience, support systems, the value of education, grit, and the inner will to achieve. This study also gave high achieving African American students a voice to share their home, school, and community experiences so other students with similar backgrounds can understand that they do not have to become a product of their circumstances and a solid educational foundation will allow them to soar above their challenges.

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## Appendix A

### Informed Consent

A-1: Parental Permission for Child's Participation in Research Study Form

A-2: Assent to Participate in Research Study Form

**PARENTAL PERMISSION FOR CHILD'S PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY**

**Striving for Excellence:  
Exploring the Experiences of Economically Disadvantaged, African American, Middle  
School Students making the Choice to be an Exception**

**What is the purpose of this research?**

We are asking your child to be in a research study because we are trying to learn more about increasing the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students by exploring the experiences of students who are academically successful. Your child is invited to participate in this study because s/he is an African American student who has demonstrated academic success during the middle school transition despite his/her economic status. This study is being conducted by Tawanda Lawrence, a graduate student at DePaul University as a requirement to obtain her Doctorate degree. This research is being supervised by her faculty advisor, Dr. Joan Lakebrink.

**How much time will this take?**

This study will take about six hours of your child's time. Your child will be individually interviewed three times for approximately two hours in a school office during the school day.

**What will my child be asked to do if I allow her/him to participate in this study?**

If you allow your child to be in this study, s/he will be asked to participate in three interviews conducted by the researcher. The questions that will be asked during the first phase of interviews focus on the factors that have contributed to your child's success and the challenges s/he has experienced. The second phase of interviews will address how your child makes meaning of his/her academic life in the school setting and how home and community experiences influence his/her academic achievement. The third and final phase of interviews will provide your child with reflection time and allow the researcher to ask additional questions for clarification. In addition, your child will receive the opportunity to review all interview transcriptions to ensure the transcripts accurately depict his/her comments. Each interview will be audio taped and transcribed later to receive an accurate record of what your child shared during the interview process.

**What are the risks involved in participating in this study?**

Being in this study does not involve any risks other than what your child would encounter in daily life. However, your child may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about answering certain questions during the interview process that might be sensitive.

**What are the benefits of my child's participation in this study?**

Your child is not expected to personally benefit from being in this study. However, we hope that what we learn from your child's experiences will provide society with a deeper understanding of how some African American, economically disadvantaged, middle school students maintain high academic status in spite of their challenges. In addition, this study will give your child a voice to share the factors that have contributed to his/her success and how s/he has developed ways to overcome obstacles and excel academically. Your child's experiences will become research to aid in closing the achievement gap that exists and provide coping strategies for other students who experience similar challenges in their lives.

**Can I decide not to allow my child to participate? If so, are there other options?**

Yes, you can choose not to allow your child to participate. Even if you allow your child to be in the study now, you can change your mind later, and your child may leave the study. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to allow your child to participate or change your mind later. In addition, even if you give your permission, your child may decide that s/he does not want to be in this study, and that is ok with us. There may be times in which your child is pulled out of class for an interview or follow-up conversation. Your child's absence from class will be excused and s/he will be given ample time to make up any missed assignments.

**How will the confidentiality of the research records be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any report we might publish, we will not include any information that will identify your child. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records that identify your child by name. Some people might review our records in order to make sure we are doing what we are supposed to. For example, DePaul University may review your child's documentation, but will not have exact identifiable information. If they look at our records, they will keep your child's information confidential. The researcher will maintain the audio tapes of each interview until the study is completed. After the study is complete, the audio tapes will be sent to a professional service to be destroyed and the researcher will receive a certificate indicating the data has been destroyed.

**Whom can I contact for more information?**

If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Tawanda Lawrence at 773-750-8236 or by email at [tawanda\\_lawrence@yahoo.com](mailto:tawanda_lawrence@yahoo.com). If you have questions about your child's rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University's Director of Research Protections at 312-362-7593 or by email at [sloesspe@depaul.edu](mailto:sloesspe@depaul.edu).

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have all my questions answered. (Check one:)

I permit my child to be in this study.

I **DO NOT** permit my child to be in this study.

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade in School: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name: \_\_\_\_\_



## **ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY**

### **Striving for Excellence: Exploring the Experiences of Economically Disadvantaged, African American, Middle School Students making the Choice to be an Exception**

#### **What is the purpose of this research?**

We are asking you to be in a research study because we are trying to learn more about increasing the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged, African American, middle school students by exploring the experiences of students who are academically successful. You are invited to participate in this study because you are an African American, middle school student who has demonstrated academic success despite your economic status. Your academic achievements include maintaining a 3.5 or higher grade point average and meeting or exceeding state standards on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). This research study will explore the home, school, and community experiences that contribute to your academic success and the skills you have obtained to overcome the challenges you may have encountered. This study is being conducted by Tawanda Lawrence, a graduate student at DePaul University.

#### **How much time will this take?**

This study will take about six hours of your time. You will be individually interviewed three times for approximately two hours in a school office during the school day.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in three interviews conducted by the researcher. The questions that will be asked during the first phase of interviews focus on the factors that have contributed to your success and the challenges you have experienced. The second phase of interviews will address how you make meaning of your academic life in the school setting and how home and community experiences influence your academic achievement. The third and final phase of interviews will give you reflection time and allow the researcher to ask additional questions for clarification. In addition, you will receive the opportunity to review all interview transcriptions to ensure the transcripts accurately depict your comments. Each interview will be audio taped and transcribed later to receive an accurate record of what you shared during the interview process.

#### **What are the risks of being in this study?**

This study does not involve any risks other than what you deal with in daily life. However, you may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about answering certain questions during the interview process that might be sensitive.

#### **What are the benefits of being in this study?**

It is not expected that you will personally benefit from being in this study. However, we hope that what we learn from your experiences will provide society with a deeper understanding of how some African American, economically disadvantaged, middle school students maintain high academic status in spite of their challenges. In addition, this study will give you a voice to share the factors that have contributed to your success and how you have developed ways to overcome your obstacles and excel academically. Your experiences will become research to aid in closing the achievement gap that exists and provide coping strategies for other students who experience similar challenges in their lives.

#### **Can I decide not to participate? If so, are there other options?**

Yes, you can choose not to participate. We have asked your parents to let you be in this study. However, even if your parents have said “yes,” you can still decide not to be in the study. Even if you agree to be in the study now, you can change your mind later and leave the study. Nothing bad will happen if you decide not to participate or change your mind later. There may be times in which you are pulled out of class for an interview or follow-up conversation. Your absence from class will be excused and you will be given ample time to make up any missed assignments.

**How will the confidentiality of the research records be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any report we might publish, we will not include any information that will identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records that identify you by name. Some people might review our records in order to make sure we are doing what we are supposed to. For example, DePaul University may review your documentation, but will not have exact identifiable information. If they look at our records, they will keep your information confidential. The researcher will maintain the audio tapes of each interview until the study is completed. After the study is complete, the audio tapes will be sent to a professional service to be destroyed and the researcher will receive a certificate indicating the data has been destroyed.

**Whom can I contact if I have questions?**

If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Tawanda Lawrence at 773-750-8236 or by email at [tawanda\\_lawrence@yahoo.com](mailto:tawanda_lawrence@yahoo.com). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University’s Director of Research Protections at 312-362-7593 or by email at [sloesspe@depaul.edu](mailto:sloesspe@depaul.edu).

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep with you.*

**Statement of Assent:**

I have read the above information. I have all my questions answered. (Check one:)

I agree to be in this study.

I **DO NOT** agree to be in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade in School: \_\_\_\_\_

Guardian/Parent’s Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B  
Interview Questions

B-1: Interview Questions

### Interview Questions

- 1) What has contributed to these students' academic success and what challenges have these students experienced as African American, middle school students living in a low-income community?
  - a. How would you describe yourself as a student?
  - b. Are you a high achiever? What does this term mean to you?
  - c. What do you do that makes you a successful student?
  - d. What do you want to do when you finish middle school?
  - e. What do you expect to do after high school?
  - f. How will you ensure that you continue to be academically successful?
  - g. What are your future goals and how sure are you that you will achieve them?
  - h. Does your family contribute to your academic success? If so, explain.
  - i. Have you experienced family issues that made it difficult for you to be a good student?
  - j. How were you able to maintain high grades during the time of these family issues?
  - k. What do your teachers do to contribute to your academic success?

- l. Do you believe teachers have treated you differently in school because of your race? If so, why do you believe it was race.
- m. Whom do you look up to? Do you consider these individuals role models, that is, someone you want to be like?
- n. How do you stay out of trouble?
- o. How have your friends contributed to your academic success?
- p. How have your friends influenced you at school and in your neighborhood? If there is pressure to do things you know are wrong, how do you resist?
- q. How would you describe your friends' performance in school? How does their performance influence your achievement?
- r. How do you maintain your high grades? Has it been difficult? If so, explain.
- s. How are you involved in your neighborhood?
- t. What experiences in your neighborhood have contributed to your academic achievement?
- u. Are there things in your neighborhood that may discourage you from being a good student? If so, explain.

- v. Are there things in your neighborhood that motivate you to be a good student? If so, explain.
  - w. Do you believe in or practice a religion? If so, how do your religious beliefs or practices influence your life and the way you approach school? If not, please explain.
  - x. What role does school play in your life? Why is school important?
  - y. Do you find schoolwork is hard? If so, what areas, and how do you keep going when schoolwork is hard? Where do you go for help?
  - z. What do you do that keeps you on task at school?
  - aa. Why do you think you are a successful student? Who and what helped you?
- 2) How do these students make meaning of their academic lives in the school setting?
- a. Describe a typical day for you at school.
  - b. What are your subjects/classes?
  - c. What extra-curricular activities are you involved in at school?
  - d. Are you involved in fine arts or athletic programs that are not associated with school? If so, explain.
  - e. If school were not required, would you attend? If not, what would you do instead?

- f. What do you like most about school?
  - g. What do you like least about school?
  - h. Do you have friends at school? If not, explain.
  - i. How do you get along with your friends?
  - j. Are there friends that you find difficult at school?
  - k. Describe your relationship with the students at your school.
  - l. Are there racial conflicts on part of students in the school?  
If so, explain.
  - m. How do the students at your school respond or react to your academic achievement?
  - n. Are your friends academically successful at school and how do their school experiences influence your performance?
  - o. Describe your relationship with teachers at your school.
  - p. How do teachers at your school respond or react to your academic achievement?
  - q. Why did you not apply to the Academy Program?
- 3) How do these students' home and community experiences impact their academic achievement?
- a. Who are the individuals who live with you?
  - b. Describe your relationship with the members of your family.

- c. Did your parents/guardians attend college? How do your parents/guardians and other adults in the house perceive the purpose of school?
- d. Do you always live in the same place? Do you go stay with relatives from time to time?
- e. Describe an ordinary day in your household.
- f. What happens when you bring home high grades, a good report card, or receive an honor roll citation?
- g. What in your household contributes most to your academic achievement?
- h. What in your household contributes least to your academic achievement?
- i. Can you study at home? If not, explain.
- j. Where do you study home?
- k. Is there anything that distracts you while studying at home?
- l. Do you have a computer at home? If not, where do you go when you need this resource?
- m. What responsibilities do you have at home or outside of home?
- n. How do you spend your free time?
- o. How do you interact with friends during after school activities, within your religious setting, or in your neighborhood?



- p. What do you like most about living in your neighborhood?
- q. What do you like least about living in your neighborhood?
- r. Does anyone in your neighborhood know that you do well in school? What do you think they think about this?
- s. What activities are you involved in outside of school?
- t. Do out of school experiences help you be a good student?  
If so, explain.