SUCCESS FACTORS IDENTIFIED BY ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS OF POVERTY

by

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Liberty University

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Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore why some low-income minority students were academically successful in school using a three-tiered approach to research including individual student interviews, classroom observations, and photographs and follow up interviews on photographs to identify factors contributing to academic success. Twenty-five students in grades 3-8 meeting the criteria of African-American, low SES, and high achieving were selected and interviewed to identify factors contributing to their academic success as measured by Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress testing. The study participant responses were compared and discussed through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), however, the data did not support the tenets of CRT as there was little discussion of race or racism during the study. Through the three-tier process themes were developed supporting academic success. Themes included positive feelings about school, internal locus of control, and having a significant role model. The findings indicated that the majority of the students attributed these themes to their success in school. Recommendations for future research were made and implications for practice were discussed.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family and friends. Without the encouragement of my husband, parents, and children, this dissertation would never have reached completion during a multitude of setbacks and frustrations. Dr. Elizabeth Pearman has served as a cheerleader, sounding board, and critical editor to make this dissertation what it is today.

I also dedicate this dissertation to the students who took the time to share their experiences and feelings about school and being successful in school with me. They were honest and eager to share their views with me and it made the study much more interesting as a result.

I also dedicate this dissertation to the committee members who worked so hard with me to complete this work, especially my chair, Dr. Erik Mullinix, my committee members, Dr. Ora Watson and Dr. Mary Garzon, and my research consultant, Dr. Lucinda Spaulding for endless hours of help, support and encouragement.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my initial chairperson, Dr. Jill A. Jones, who has been an encouraging angel on my shoulder for the past two years and an amazing guide and chairperson prior to that. Without Dr. Jones guidance and encouragement, I would have never finished this project. She continues to touch lives each and every day!

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List of Abbreviations

AP – Advanced Placement

CRT –Critical Race Theory

IQ – Intelligence Quotient

MAP – Measures of Academic Progress

NCLB – No Child Left Behind

NWEA – Northwest Education Association

PK – Pre-Kindergarten

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, African-American students from rural and poverty backgrounds have not been successful in school, typically scoring below standards set by school districts, state departments of education and outlined in No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) legislation (Croizet & Dutrevis, 2004). However, some schools and students break this stereotype and achieve at an acceptable level as measured by standardized measures (Harris, 2007). This study focuses on hearing the voices of students who have overcome multiple risk factors and are academically successful in spite of African-American heritage, residency in a rural area, and living in low-socioeconomic homes.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines the following areas: the background of the study, the problem statements of the study, identifies purpose of the study, as well as the research questions, and finally outlines the research plan. In addition, the general research questions are identified and the significance of the study is discussed.

Background

Education has shifted to a world of increased test scores, accountability, data-driven instruction, a demand for immediate results, and unsatisfactory school ratings. Educators, especially in those schools that are labeled as failing, express concerns that the expectations and tests are unfair to students, teachers and schools (Sack-Min, 2008). Legislators, on the other hand, without a clear suggestion of a solution, demand to see specific and immediate results. The requirements of NCLB legislation demand schools

demonstrate significant improvement in student achievement, while consistently increasing the minimum level needed to demonstrate adequate progress each year, causing a nearly unattainable goal for many failing schools while identifying many schools as failing when this may not be the reality. Additionally, many factors outside the scope of school influence such as socio-economic status, minority status, and rural upbringing are ignored.

Harris (2007) notes that there is a significant difference between the chances of a high-poverty school reaching high performance standards outlined by NCLB and a low-poverty school reaching high performance standards outlined by NCLB. While Forte (2010) identifies fatal flaws within both the manner in identifying failing schools, suggesting a needed shift in focus from achievement proficiency to a focus on individual student learning and progress. In addition, the current premise of identifying schools in need of improvement and applying a prescribed improvement process does not necessarily result in the desired increase in student achievement and magically improved schools (Forte, 2010).

Studies relating socioeconomic status to poor academic performance are plentiful and students from low socioeconomic status are frequently reported to receive less educational return from schools (Alspaugh, 1996; Anttonen & Fleming, 2001; Horton, 2004; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Slovacek, Kunnan, & Kim, 2002). Although successful schools exist with disadvantaged students, most children from low socioeconomic families are more likely to attend schools with a higher percentage of low achieving students who also have low socioeconomic status (Slovacek

et al., 2002). Educational studies (Alspaugh, 1996; Cunningham, 2006) indicate that the higher percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch within a school, the higher the number of students demonstrating academic difficulties. Traditionally, students on free or reduced lunch have the highest documented negative correlation with student achievement of any other group (Cunningham, 2006). Levin (2007) further asserts that socioeconomic status has a greater impact on student achievement and most accurately predicts future outcomes for a student.

Minority status also is a contributing factor to students being treated differently or labeled as academically deficient in comparison to majority culture counterparts (Vang, 2006). Minority students often experience discrimination from both teachers and peers in the school setting resulting in a lower self-esteem and a diminished bond with the school experience (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009). Ironically, Dotter et al. (2009) also identify lower self-esteem and a diminished bond with school as being directly correlated to lower student achievement and a higher incidence of school dropout rate. Additionally, minority students face challenges as a result of cultural differences and lack of exposure to the majority culture (Vang, 2006). As a result, African-American students often subscribe to academic disengagement and less time spent on academic pursuits in an effort to fit in with African-American peers (Ogbu, 2003).

The achievement gap between minority and majority culture students is another factor impacting success of African-American students from rural homes of low socioeconomic status. This achievement gap brings into question the fairness of standardized testing to all groups (Beck & Shofstall, 2005; Gardner, 2007; Maylone,

2004). In the current era of accountability and high stakes testing, the fairness and validity of these measures to different student groups becomes more important than at any other time in the history of American education. Studies have identified significantly high correlations between the ethnic composition of a school and the socioeconomic composition of a school (Taylor & Harris, 2003). Teachers also often believe that African-American students are not as smart as majority culture peers, especially in advanced levels and coursework and these perceptions often translate into a less adequate education for African-American students (Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008). A study conducted by Tyler & Boelter (2008) emphasizes the importance of positive teacher expectations as a direct correlate to the level of student academic engagement and academic efficacy; both can be associated with academic performance.

Schools have applied hundreds, perhaps even thousands of programs and processes devoted to improving achievement for African-American students (Poplin & Soto-Hinman, 2006). However, programs that focus merely on student achievement without considering and providing additional social support to minority populations may not provide all that struggling students need to change the tide of sinking achievement (Berzin, 2010). Additional recommendations from a study from Zhang & Cowen (2009) identify the need for future school reforms addressing needs of neighborhoods, not just schools, as the study showed that academic achievement was strongly related to neighborhood characteristics.

Although a variety of reasons have been attributed to the lack of success African-American students experience in the academic setting, there is a small population of

students who demonstrate success in the academic setting, regardless of possessing multiple risk factors for academic failure. This study seeks to talk individually to these successful students to find out the factors that have enabled them, in spite of many factors stacked against them, to become successful in school. The study seeks to provide a voice to the students who have overcome traditional obstacles of race, socioeconomic background, and poverty to become success stories in the academic arena.

Problem Statement

African-American students from rural and low socioeconomic backgrounds face many challenges to become successful in school. However, some students are able to overcome the obstacles and attain school success in spite of possessing many risk factors. How are some children successful while others continue to fail in similar environments? Graham Road Elementary; an low income, high minority, elementary school in Fairfax, Virginia, has recently overcome its low performing status, but was ranked as one of the lowest performing schools in Fairfax in 2004. The difference for Graham Road Elementary compared to other low-performing, high minority schools is the attitudes of the staff who share a belief that all students can and will learn and it is the responsibility of the staff of adults to figure out how to make learning occur for all students (Chenoweth, 2010). The key for the Graham Road Elementary and similar schools who experience success despite the challenges faced by the staff appears to be the creation of a collaborative, supportive culture both within the school and within the community (Chenoweth, 2010).

What factors do successful African-American students from rural and low socioeconomic backgrounds identify as the keys to their academic success? By identifying these factors, school leaders in failing schools may be able to help other students who struggle become academically successful. One common factor noted in schools with low performing, minority students is that many of the students from low SES, minority homes do not have the background knowledge or large vocabulary necessary to excel in traditional academic settings (Chenoweth, 2010). Minority students often lack basic background knowledge and vocabularies as a result of a lack of opportunity to participate in mentorships, fewer adult relationships, and fewer supportive relationships than more affluent student counterparts (Fram et al, 2007).

Using the phenomenological approach this study seeks to listen to the viewpoints, ideas, and opinions of the students who have overcome the obstacles of race, socioeconomic status, and rural setting to allow educators to look at the problems of traditionally struggling students from a different perspective, the perspective of the student.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the reasons for high academic achievement for students from low SES backgrounds in a rural public school setting. High academic achievement will generally be defined as above average performance in the classroom and on standardized measures despite experiencing multiple risk factors for student failure, including low SES, rural environment, and minority status. The study used participants in grades 3 – 8, aged 8 -14, who

demonstrated high academic achievement and used individual student interviews (Tier 1), classroom observations (Tier 2), and photographs taken by study participants with follow up interviews (Tier 3) to determine factors participants identified as contributing to high academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to use a qualitative phenomenological approach to highlight factors that participants identify as leading them to excel in school achievement. Study participants were selected based on race, African-American; low socioeconomic status; and at the time of the study resided in a rural setting; factors that typically are associated with academic failure in traditional school settings.

Significance of Study

It becomes essential for schools and educators to use all available data in an effort to assist children from all backgrounds to obtain success in the academic arena based on the current level of accountability expected in public school systems. For many years in public education, certain students from low socioeconomic, rural, and minority backgrounds have consistently failed in the academic setting. This study used the voices of the students to identify factors that served to increase student achievement in the hope that the findings can be applied to other students from similar backgrounds and increase overall levels of success for traditionally failing students.

Students were selected for the study based on the fact that they demonstrated success in the academic arena while hailing from racial and socioeconomic backgrounds that have been typically associated with school failure. For many years, it has been an accepted fact that students from low SES backgrounds and minority status traditionally

score lower on achievement measures than white peers creating the well-publicized achievement gap (Zhang & Cowen, 2009). The question of why certain students find success when the majority of their peers find failure originating from similar backgrounds and circumstances has been studied extensively, however, this study seeks to examine the reasons identified by the participants as the most significant factors in their academic success.

Current mandates by NCLB in the United States indicate that schools rated as "in need of improvement" either provide alternative school choices for students or provide supplemental services for students enrolled in failing schools (Zhang & Cowen, 2009). Both of these options are difficult for students attending rural settings based on distance from other schools and a lack of resources available in rural communities (Forte, 2010). The antidote to the current NCLB problem lies in a different measurement method of determining school progress, and creating better schools for these students and eliminating the problems inherent in the current school situation (Forte, 2010).

The focus of future school reform needs to differ from current school reform measures to additionally address academic differences in suburban and rural areas, focus on neighborhoods, rather than just schools, and finally to recruit quality teachers, develop innovative school buildings, and provide adequate resources in rural areas (Zhang & Cowen, 2009). Further, Forte (2010) asserts that NCLB needs to change from an evaluation of achievement (current practice) to an evaluation of effectiveness measuring student achievement and individual student progress.

Definitions

Academic high-achieving students – for the purposes of the study, a high-achieving student was one who obtained a level designated as proficient or advanced based on the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) ratings as determined by the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test in either the discipline of reading, the discipline of math, or both areas.

Academic resiliency – defined as students who succeed in school despite the presence of adverse conditions, specifically poverty and a rural setting for the purposes of this study.

Critical Race Theory – defined as the view that racism is normal and exists in society and occurs naturally based on the social structures inherent in society today (Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008).

Phenomenology – A form of qualitative research that is "designed to describe and interpret an experience by determining the meaning of the experience as perceived by the people who have participated in it" (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006, p. 461).

Rural – defined as an area outside of cities or large towns, for the purposes of the study, it is an area with a low population density with the closest suburban/urban area residing over 40 miles away.

Research Questions

Qualitative like quantitative studies need guidance in planning and executing a study. Guidance in this study takes the form of research questions to be addressed in the study. This phenomenological qualitative study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do rural low SES African American students describe why they think they are successful in academic pursuits in school?
2. What are the factors affecting the academic achievement of rural low SES African American students?
3. What resources were available to rural low SES African American students to pursue their academic studies?

Interviews with students participating in the study sought to explore students' experiences of being academically successful.

Research Plan

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the academic experiences of a group of male and female African-American students enrolled in grades 3-8, living in a rural area, from low socioeconomic status (SES) homes and scoring well on any type of academic test. Phenomenological qualitative research seeks to understand the phenomena of interest by viewing the phenomena through the participants' eyes, experiences, and words (Patton, 2002). Student academic success was measured by use of the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) for grades 3-8 in reading and math. SES was determined by using free lunch status as reported to the participating school district. Students meeting the criteria for the study were contacted by letter and provided the opportunity to participate in the study if the parents consented and students assented. Identified students participated in individual interviews (Tier 1), were observed in a classroom setting (Tier 2), took photographs with a disposable camera, and were interviewed about the photographs they took of factors

contributing to their academic success. Tier 2 observations were conducted by an impartial third party researcher, who was a Master's level counselor and behavior intervention specialist with extensive experience in school settings through work with public schools and additional work with a doctoral level psychologist in private practice. The third party observer observed each study participant during either a Math or an English/Language Arts class. The classroom observation examined on-task/off-task behavior of each identified student and one similar researcher-selected peer of the same gender.

During the third phase of data collection, Tier 3, scripted instructions were provided to each participant (Appendix F) and a disposable camera was given to each participant by the researcher. A two-week time period was allotted for study participants to take a minimum of twelve pictures on the twenty-four exposure camera. After the photographs taken by study participants were developed, participants were interviewed by the researcher a second time to discuss the photographs. Students were asked why they selected a particular subject and how did the subject help them do well in school. A small number of students failed to return the disposable camera to the researcher, however, these participants were still interviewed about the pictures they took, but failed to return.

Delimitations

The delimitations of the study include the selected participants for the study. The study participants were selected only if certain criteria were met. The criteria included African-American heritage; low socioeconomic status; and at the time of the study

participants resided in a rural setting; factors that typically are associated with academic failure in traditional school settings. Participants who did not exhibit these characteristics would not be directly relevant to the study as the research sought to examine academic success for students from environments traditionally associated with academic failure.

Overview of Study

Chapter 1, Introduction, provided background information related to chronic academic problems faced by students of African-American heritage originating from low-socioeconomic, rural homes. The purpose of the study is to interview students who exhibit the risk factors of academic failure, but experience academic success, to identify factors each participant attributes to individual academic success. Delimitations and limitations of the study and definitions of common terms used throughout the study were provided. Chapter 2, Review of Literature, examines related literature to target students and academic failure. This chapter includes a discussion of the theoretical framework related to the study. Chapter 3, Methodology, provides details of the research design, participants, demographics of the setting, and procedures involved in data collection. Chapter 3 also includes an outline of ethical considerations, the researcher's role and the trustworthiness of the study. Chapter 4 provides information related to the analysis of data and identifies the factors students stated attributed to personal academic success. Chapter 5 serves to discuss the themes discovered during the data analysis phase, as well as provide ideas for using information gleaned during the study to increase the number of students with risk factors for academic failure and to encourage future research in this area.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The second chapter of the dissertation will review theoretical framework of the literature review, examine typical barriers to student achievement, briefly discuss school reform, explore the achievement gap, and identify factors that contribute to the success of struggling learners. Specific information such as poverty and minority status will be examined as well as issues related to student testing, teacher perceptions and parental impact will be explored. Throughout the chapter, the characteristics common to the study participants will be identified and discussed.

Theoretical Framework

An overarching theory that will provide the basis for the study is critical race theory (CRT). The theory encompasses the view that racism is normal in society and merely occurs naturally based on the social structures inherent in society today (Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008). CRT discusses and illustrates the advantages that Caucasians have merely by being white in a society that assigns privilege to people based on racist notions (Gillborn, 2008). Overall, critical race theory can be used to examine problems in education through use of the perspective of color or race as a means to examine ideas and perspectives (Lynn, 2006). The main tenets of CRT are:

- Racism is normal in American society and strategies exist for exposing it in its various forms; racism is common (Carter, 2008; Su, 2007).
- Significance of experiences to analyze the myths and presuppositions that make up the common culture about race invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down (Carter, 2008). An analysis of the history of African-American

education in the United States demonstrates that education was never intended to liberate African-Americans in this country (Lynn, 2006).

- CRT challenges traditional and dominant discourse and paradigms on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs impact people of color (Carter, 2008). In addition, dominant groups are unlikely to join any form of anti-racist groups unless such groups foster some self-interest on the part of the dominant group member (Su, 2007).
- A commitment to social justice (Carter, 2008).
- An examination of race and racism across disciplinary fields (e.g. psychology and education) and an imperative need for people of color to create and advance a "counter-narrative" to the commonly expressed views and norms of society (Carter, 2008; Su, 2007).

Most groups in poverty generally achieve at a lower level in school regardless of racial identity (Gillborn, 2008). Critical Race Theory creates a way in which researchers can analyze, interpret, and call attention to the existence of racism and race in education in our society (Lynn, 2006). CRT provides a theory to examine how race operates in our schools providing a lens to look at the problems with race and racism and also to develop interventions and responses that move toward positive change in society (Lynn, 2006).

Carter (2008) suggested that African-American youth must view achievement as coming from within themselves. Students having an internal locus of control rather than an external locus typically demonstrate academic success. Students with an internal locus of control attribute academic outcomes to be guided by personal actions and

decisions such as working hard, studying, etc. Students with an external locus of control attribute academic outcomes to forces outside themselves such as racism, teacher dislike, etc. Students from minority and majority backgrounds must view achievement as a human trait rather than a trait associated with a particular race (Carter, 2008). Gardner (2007) suggests that one of the difficulties with minorities and school achievement is due to a majority of people in the African-American culture having an external locus of control, thus casting blame or attributing success to factors outside of themselves.

Carter (2008) suggests six parts of the CRT model that successful minority students need to embody in order to become successful students in the dominant culture. Based on the interview responses, the study will compare the factors that are identified by study respondents to determine if the successful students possess the six factors as suggested as necessary by Carter (2008). The six factors include:

- Students believe in themselves and feel that individual effort and self-accountability lead
- Students view achievement as a human character trait that can define membership in their racial group.
- Students possess a critical consciousness about racism and the challenges it presents to their present and future opportunities as well as those of other members of their racial group.
- Students possess a pragmatic attitude about the utility of schooling for their future as members of a subdominant racial group.
- Students value multicultural competence as a skill for success.

- Students develop adaptive strategies for overcoming racism in the school context that allow them to maintain high academic achievement and a strong racial/ethnic self-concept (Carter, 2008).

This phenomenology sought to tie the tenets of CRT to the shared experiences identified by study participants to examine racism in the field of education and to determine if the student participants were able to create a "counter-narrative" to the norms and expectations of society. The study uses an examination of critical race theory to call attention to the existence of racism in education and to identify ways in which successful students overcome the impact of racism as seen by the eyes of the participants and to identify any self-proclaimed coping mechanism used by students to change the common outcome of failure into academic success.

Barriers to Student Achievement

Poverty

Poverty statistics for young children in the United States are startling. Current figures indicate that one out of every five American children live in poverty, one of the highest poverty rates in the developed world (Neuman, 2009). One-third of American children spend at least one year below the poverty line and 18% experience extreme poverty (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). Statistics show that, consistently over the past several years, the percentage of US students living in poverty to be higher than any other country of comparable economic development in the world (Viadero, 2007). Viadero (2007) further identifies poor students holding majority in public schools with 54% of American children now living in poverty. Seventy-seven percent of educational potential

is determined by nature and genetics, and children from families of low socioeconomic status (SES) are likely to maintain the same SES status as adults presenting a dim outlook for students from poverty (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). The rate of poverty is two to three times higher for minority students and younger children are more likely to experience poverty than older children (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; McLoyd, 1998). The impact of poverty is significantly greater on children in the early years of development (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). A study by McLoyd (1998) indicates that persistent poverty has a far more negative effect on IQ, academic achievement, and social emotional functioning than transitory poverty. The poverty status at age 3 predicts, with reasonable accuracy, a child's IQ at age 5, while 5 year olds who experience chronic poverty demonstrate a three-fourths of a standard deviation lower IQ than their non-poor counterparts (McLoyd, 1998). The "culture of poverty" theory, according to Ansalone (2001), does not emphasize key factors associated with traditional academic success such as, "hard work, delayed gratification, and the perception that schooling means success" (p. 35).

Studies regarding socioeconomic status related to poor academic performance are plentiful as students with low socioeconomic status reportedly receive less educational return from schools (Alspaugh, 1996; Anttonen & Fleming, 2001; Horton, 2004; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Slovacek, Kunnan, & Kim, 2002). Family poverty status, determined by qualifying for free or reduced lunch program, was found by Caldas & Bankston (1997) to have a negative effect on student achievement. Even in other countries, SES is identified as the most significant factor in determining student educational attainment (Levin, 2007). It is commonly accepted that poverty

significantly impacts all areas of a child's life, including educational attainment (Ansalone, 2001).

Studies document that SES affects the educational outcomes of students in the areas of test scores, grade retention, and graduation rates (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). Students from low SES backgrounds begin school with significantly fewer skills than students from higher SES backgrounds, thus lower SES students begin school behind peers and remain behind peers as they progress through school (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). Students in low SES homes are disadvantaged as learners due to a lack of exposure to cultural experiences found in higher SES homes. Additionally, language in low SES, minority homes is different from language in schools, causing possible confusion and academic difficulty for students from low SES backgrounds (Bell, Aftanas, & Abrahamson, 1976). In sum, parents in low SES homes are not able to supply similar language experiences evidenced in more affluent homes (Ansalone, 2001). Students from homes in poverty have significantly fewer resources in many areas than their higher class counterparts (Gardner, 2007). Additionally, students from low SES backgrounds are documented to run a higher risk for emotional and social problems including conduct issues, low self-esteem, and peer differences, which also increases the likelihood of academic difficulty in school (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). Aat the same time these families in poverty do not have access to community resources that can assist with these social and emotional issues that these students struggle to resolve (McLoyd, 1998). This lack of development of self-esteem in children of poverty leads to difficulty in school achievement (Gardner, 2007).

Although highly successful schools exist for some children, most children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to attend schools with a higher percentage of low achieving students who also have low socioeconomic status (Slovacek et al., 2002). Reliably, if you know the percentage of student receiving free and reduced lunch within a school you can predict the level of academic achievement of the students (Cunningham, 2006). Lower SES students also attend schools with fewer educational resources (Slovacek et al., 2002) and more poorly trained teachers (Vang, 2006). Studies indicate that high poverty schools are two times more likely to employ teachers who are unprepared or working out of their field of training and five times more likely to employ teachers who have failed the teacher certification test at least one time compared to schools in more affluent areas with a higher proportion of majority students (Horton, 2004, Vang, 2006). Many schools with a higher percentage of students from low SES backgrounds do not spend money or allocate resources as efficiently as schools with a greater percentage of students from higher SES backgrounds (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). Teacher expectations are also found to be low toward children from low SES backgrounds, regardless of student intellectual or academic potential merely based on the poverty level of the students (Rouse & Barrow, 2006).

Children from low SES homes experience a vicious cycle of failure in terms of student achievement. Poor educational achievement causes poverty, while poverty is a major factor influencing academic failure (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). Low SES students experience failure in school, which increases their disinterest in the subject matter. This disinterest, in turn, creates more failure in school – a vicious cycle (Arnold

& Doctoroff, 2003). Studies identify the immediate social environment of the child as a more powerful influence on the academic achievement of the child than teachers or schools; therefore, student SES has a large impact on student achievement (Alspaugh, 1996; Taylor & Harris, 2003). Students on free or reduced lunch have the highest documented negative correlation with student achievement of any other group (Alspaugh, 1996). Statistics show only 56% of low SES students go to college and a lower number of these students from low SES backgrounds enroll in AP courses in high school (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). Other studies identify family income as the highest correlate of student achievement and demonstrate that income and poverty status are significant predictors of student IQ (Alspaugh, 1996). Overall, socioeconomic status is a powerful predictor of academic achievement and the influences of socioeconomic status on academic skill acquisition begin at an early age, prior to entrance into school (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003).

A study by Merlo, Bowman, and Barnett (2007) also attributes differences in reading level between high and low SES students to result from differences in home environment and parenting practices rather than any significant differences in ability. Children in schools or classes that have a higher proportion of minority students also have a larger number of peers who are reading below grade level (Fram, 2007). An additional factor that can impact school achievement is the experiences and attitudes of parents toward school having an impact on the child's learning and attitudes about school (Gardner, 2007). Children of poverty have a higher risk for perinatal complications, which often result in developmental problems, which may translate into early difficulty in

school achievement (McLoyd, 1998). For students from low SES backgrounds to be successful, students must have strong, positive self-concepts, however, since students from low SES backgrounds often enter school behind the level of higher SES peers, attend schools with lower success rates, and receive education from poorly trained teachers who hold low expectations of students it becomes difficult, if not impossible for these students to demonstrate high achievement in school (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Borman & Rachuba, 2001; Gerardi, 1990; Horton, 2004). Students from high poverty and high minority populations often have poorer quality teachers who use universal standards for assessing student learning rather than a more individualized (and more effective) means of student assessment (Fram, 2007). How can students from low SES backgrounds achieve at the same level as majority culture peers?

Poverty has a proven negative impact on student achievement (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). An Arnold and Doctoroff (2003) study demonstrated that fourth grade students who received free or reduced lunch scored only 2% in the advanced range and 12% in the proficient range in reading. This standard is significantly lower than an expected distribution of scores and significantly lower than performance by peers who did not receive free or reduced lunch (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). The family as a whole is also dramatically impacted by socioeconomic status. A study by McLoyd (1998) found that poverty, low levels of maternal education, and lack of material resources in the home produced a high correlation with less cognitive stimulation in the home environment. According to Lewis (2008),

> Living in a poor neighborhood takes its toll on children's cognitive abilities. Severe concentrated poverty influences maternal parenting practices, affects school funding, and affects the speech community to which parents and children are exposed. The researchers found that the long-lasting consequence of living in concentrated poverty for a black child is equal to missing a full year of school, and the effect continues even if a child moves to a better neighborhood. (p. 404)

Black students have the highest negative correlation between the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch and achievement scores than any other racial group (Taylor & Harris, 2003).

Students from low SES homes experience difficulty when faced with school challenges. Overall, it is a common fact; schools are failing many children. Becnel (1993) notes,

> Our public education system is also deficient in fundamental ways that actually contribute to the academic failure of too many Black children. Part of the problem is that public schools have never made it their mission to educate all the children. Poor children of color, many of whom bring a host of behavioral problems into the classroom—problems caused by malnutrition, frustration and short attention spans—often are allowed to drop out with little or no effort expended to encourage them to stay in school. And a rapidly growing number of those dropouts, especially young Black males, have no place to go but to the streets, to prison, or to the morgue. (p. 93)

Minority Status

Minority students are often labeled and treated differently than classmates from the majority culture (Vang, 2006). Additionally, teacher expectations and opinions of minority students are often characterized as lower than their higher SES counterparts. Ironically, minority student behaviors are impacted more than majority students by teacher attitudes resulting in depressing projections for minority students in schools (Borman & Rachuba, 2001). Young et al. (2003) assert that "beyond class, something racial is depressing the academic performance of these (African-American) students" (p. 111). Minority students begin school at a distinct disadvantage than their higher SES counterparts due to lack of experience and exposure to the majority culture. Dropout rates for minority students are 3 times higher than students of the majority culture (Vang, 2006). Minority students are also often taught lower level content and given materials that do not meet state standards for instruction compared to majority culture peers (Vang, 2006). Schools with a higher concentration of minority students demonstrated lower test performance in a Caldas and Bankston study (1997). In terms of school population, an increase in minority population or an increase in low SES population equates to a decrease in student achievement (Fram, 2007).

Minority students may also have difficulty understanding the majority culture based on a set of different cultural experiences (Vang, 2006). However, schools expect all students to speak Standard English and to "act white" often causing additional difficulty for minority students (Horton, 2004). As a result of these majority culture biases, minority students are often "destined to perform according to the low expectations

of their teachers" (Vang, 2006, p. 24). Based on the many biases faced by minority children, ethnic minority students may perceive racial inequality within the educational setting that can create limits on both social and economic factors which manifests itself into a belief that working hard in school will have no payoff for minority children since the odds are stacked against the success of minority students in most cases (Taylor & Graham, 2007). During adolescence, a study conducted by Taylor and Graham (2007) indicated that popularity and admiration of peers for African-American children, especially boys, was associated with reputations of being "cool" or "tough" rather than excelling academically. This result demonstrates a different mindset for low SES, minority children compared with peers of higher SES levels or from the majority culture. Young et al. (2003) also note that although parents from African-American culture express the importance of education when asked, these same parents often communicate a distrust of the educational system to children, doubting that society will truly reward hard work with school achievement based on negative school experiences of the parents.

African-American children, in order to be successful in a school setting, must adopt three different social identities. First, they must adopt the identity of membership in a "caste-like" group, a group that did not originally choose to live in Anglo society and is ranked at a low level by social standards. Secondly, they must assume the identity as members of mainstream society and finally, the identity as a member of a cultural group in opposition to mainstream society (Young et al., 2003). In addition, poor, minority students lack opportunities for mentors, relationships, support and information from higher SES groups. This lack of opportunity diminishes the number of positive role

models for poor minority students, which also increases the likelihood of school failure (Fram, 2007). As a result of these conflicting identities and lack of exposure to positive adult influences, African-American students often subscribe to the "low effort syndrome" or the "norm of minimal effort" resulting in disengagement in academic work, little effort assigned to school work and diminished time spent on academic pursuits as students get older in an effort to fit in with the dominant racial group (African-American) rather than being derided for "acting white" by peers (Ogbu, 2003).

School Reform

NCLB

NCLB has provided a lens to examine outcomes for schools and has created an expectation that results for low income students and high income students should be the same (Forte, 2010). Although this initially appears to be a positive move toward school reform, it is evident that schools cannot overcome the many challenges of academic inequity alone without addressing other social issues and economic problems that are found deeply rooted within American society (Neuman, 2009).

As a result of the increased emphasis on accountability for schools from NCLB legislation, all schools need to examine the data that is gathered on student achievement to guide instruction and improve results for all children. The NCLB legislation provides an educational model for schools that benefits schools and students that are successful and perform at the top of academic scales while punishing those schools and students that struggle with increasing student achievement (Vang, 2006).

The NCLB legislation, however, has several flaws. Overall the rationale behind the legislation is that NCLB allows states to identify school that need improvement, followed by a prescription to improve outcomes at a school which will ultimately result in increased student achievement and better schools (Forte, 2010). The NCLB legislation does not reward schools for addressing factors that they can control, but punishes them for factors, such as a high population of students from low SES backgrounds and minority status (Harris, 2007). The overarching indicator of success in NCLB, adequate yearly progress (AYP), places the focus solely on achievement rather than effectiveness by providing no credit for a school in increasing school level scores or promoting gains in individual student growth, but rather only measures a percentage of students at a proficient level (Forte, 2010).

Berliner (2006) notes that school reform through NCLB legislation is influenced and impacted by several factors outside of the educational arena. Unfortunately schools have no control over many of these factors, such as level of poverty and parental level of education. NCLB, by promoting a system of measuring learning levels rather than learning gains, further punishes schools based on educational inequality that exists prior to students entering the schools (Harris, 2007). School performance, as measured by NCLB standards, amounts to assigning sanctions and rewards based on the school's level of poverty and racial composition rather than any true measurement of student achievement (Beck & Shoffstall, 2005). The school curriculum not only needs to bridge the gaps that exist both between achievement of the majority and minority groups, but

also bridge the gap between knowledge and experiences of students with the knowledge and experiences they need to acquire (Vang, 2006).

Accountability

The pressures of NCLB make adequate yearly progress for students and schools with high minority and high poverty virtually impossible. Minority and low SES students often receive a "second class" education from public schools compared to peers that do not come from minority groups or low SES backgrounds through no fault of their own, but a failure of the education system and structures that measure progress within that system (Vang, 2006).

Achievement Gap

An achievement gap exists between students of color and white students as well as between poor and wealthy students (Maylone, 2004). A linear and logistic modeling study by Roscigno, et al (2006) identified students from rural areas as having substantially fewer resources available than suburban counterparts. Factors such as lower income, less college experience among parents, lower per pupil allocations of funding, lower family investment in education, and in the Southern United States a higher concentration of non-white and poor population contributed significantly to lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates among students when compared with more affluent suburban peers (Roscigno et al., 2006). Harris (2007) identified low-poverty schools to be 22 times more likely to be high performing than their high-poverty counterparts and those with both low-poverty as well as low-minority are 89 times more

likely to reach the benchmark of high performing than their counterparts from high-poverty and high-minority populations.

Schools serving poor and minority students often have lower quality schools both in terms of facilities, educational level of success, higher percentages of under prepared and inexperienced teachers, and teachers with out-of-field certifications as well as many long-term and short-term substitute teachers (Horton, 2004; Rouse & Barrow, 2006). In addition, teachers tend to perceive poor and low SES students less positively and have lower expectations for these students (McLoyd, 1998). Minority students often have school environments that are less conducive to academic resiliency. Unfortunately, this same low SES, minority population requires more support for academic resiliency than any other population to realize academic success (Borman & Rachuba, 2001). These lower quality schools leave students unprepared to master skills of the next grade level, perpetuating the achievement gap as each year of schooling progresses and providing students limited hope of professional success after high school (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). Gardner (2007) aptly summarizes this sad fact: "There are bad schools, and there are incompetent teachers. And once again both are all too often found in African-American neighborhoods" (p. 545). Although the achievement gap is identified by researchers as a serious problem, there is no consensus on either the cause or the solution to this serious problem (Fram, 2007). In fact, current ideologies in education do not produce the results that will close any existing achievement gap between minority and majority cultures and educators appear highly resistant to exploring any methods that challenge these current ideologies (Poplin & Soto-Hinman, 2006).

Testing

A large body of research questions the validity of many standardized tests relating to students from minority groups as well as students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Beck & Shoffstall, 2005; Gardner, 2007; Maylone, 2004). It is imperative that educators and legislators examine the accuracy and the validity of the data for each specific school population. If schools do not have accurate data on student achievement, it will become impossible to truly improve the achievement of all students for the benefit of children as well as the future of the nation.

In a high stakes testing era, all students are tested by some form of standardized testing instrument and schools are publicly judged and held to a very high standard based on student performance on these measures. Critics question the validity of these measures, especially in measuring achievement of students from minority and low SES backgrounds. The standardized instruments themselves as well as the testing situations may create a type of stereotype threat to low SES students, which can negatively impact student performance. Further, traditional standardized tests reflect the majority or Anglo Saxon/European culture (Vang, 2006).

In terms of testing, students with different cultural experiences choose different answers based on individual experiences (Vang, 2006). A study by the Negro Education Review indicated that scores of African-American students increased when a test used to measure achievement sought to include materials relevant to the cultural background of African-Americans, scores improved significantly (Vang, 2006). An additional 2 X 2 factorial design study of 40 students by Croizet and Dutrevis (2004) indicated that low

SES students performed significantly better on tests that were characterized as non-diagnostic measures rather than "tests" or measures with some diagnostic value. Another 2 X 2 factorial design study with 54 participants examined the verbal content of standardized testing measures and the impact on low SES students (Bell, Aftanas, & Abrahamson, 1976). Low SES students were found to perform better on measures with less verbal content. Therefore, the validity of testing for minority and poor students can be called into question to some extent.

Achievement scores of African-American students demonstrate a high correlation with the ethnic and socioeconomic composition of a school (Taylor & Harris, 2003). Higher academic achievement scores are associated with a lower proportion of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch and a higher proportion of white student enrollment (Taylor & Harris, 2003).

Teacher Perceptions

Many teachers in classrooms today believe that African-American students simply lack the intellectual capacity to function in schools, especially at advanced levels of achievement (Henfield et al., 2008, n = 12). During a time where schools are working to improve education for students from poor and racial backgrounds the low expectations of the adults interacting with these students disrupt the performance of children of color from low income backgrounds (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Poplin & Soto-Hinman, 2006). Based on a correlational study conducted by Caldas and Bankston (2001) of 42,041 minority students in Louisiana, African-American students perform at a lower level in the academic arena due to lower teacher expectations and perceptions of these

students regardless of the SES level of the students. An ANOVA study conducted with 106 teachers by Auwarter and Aruguete (2008) further supports the study by Caldas and Bankston (2001), finding that teachers rated hypothetical students in low SES scenarios as having a less promising future than identical students with high SES.

Further the Auwarter and Aruguete (2008) study discovered that teachers with low expectations for students from low SES backgrounds had even lower ratings and expectations for boys from low SES backgrounds while boys from low SES backgrounds are "particularly vulnerable" (p. 246) to the negative impact associated with low teacher expectations, creating situation with a high potential for academic failure. Teachers who feel that SES is a predetermining factor of student achievement will feel less effective working with students from low SES backgrounds and perpetuate low performance of low income children (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008). These teachers should participate in professional development activities to increase awareness and knowledge about African-American student academic potential (Henfield et al., 2008). The key to improving low expectations for African-American students is to find interventions and techniques for teachers to improve negative and stereotypical attitudes and help to increase the low efficacy of teachers in this area (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008).

Parental Impact

The academic achievement of a student does not rely solely on the innate ability of the child, but also on the cognitive ability of the parent and the ability of that parent to assist the child with assignments (Zady, Portes, DelCastillo, & Dunham, 1998). A descriptive survey study of 220 parents by Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman (2007) identifies

parent involvement as the factor most closely related to student achievement of any other factor. Attitudes of parents from low SES homes often have a belief that educational opportunities are equal when compared with attitudes of middle class or affluent parents (Bracey, 2001). Ansalone (2001) identified family background as the most important predictor of academic success for all students. Studies agree that students from low SES backgrounds have "significantly less school success" than their counterparts from high SES backgrounds (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005, p. 432). Parents need to play an active role in the placement of their children into the most rigorous courses in school and reinforce the importance of a good education to their children (Henfield et al., 2008). However, education is often not considered an important value of the African-American culture; therefore efforts should be made by schools to encourage African-American families to invest in the education of their children (Lynn, 2006).

Unfortunately, when studied, parents of low SES households report lower educational expectations, less monitoring of school assignments, and less overall supervision of social activities compared with higher SES families (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005). The Jacobs and Harvey (2005) study also identified parental attitudes and expectations to make a large impact on student achievement, identified parental influence and family practices to have an impact likely to overcome negative effects of family economy, and identified low SES families who are actively involved in school and education to be able to overcome the negative impact of lack of economic resources. A further study by Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman (2007) also indicates that the more a parent is involved in all aspects of the child's education, both at home and at school, the

more academic success the child will experience. However, most schools struggle with translating parent involvement into student achievement and schools with high minority populations contend with the additional challenge of education not being an African-American cultural value in many cases (Ingram et al., 2007; Lynn, 2006).

Academically successful students are found in families where parents have a strong academic background or value strong academic background and convey this message to their children (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005). Schools that increase parent academic support, school engagement in academic success and social support systems could change student aspirations for school achievement (Berzin, 2010).

Success Factors

Parents

Although parents can have a negative impact on student achievement, it is also known that parents are a strong positive factor in student achievement as well. Merlo, Bowman, and Barnett (2007) discovered that the major difference between high and low SES students on reading achievement measures resulted from different experiences within the home environment, including access to resources and opportunities to learn. Additionally, students targeted as successful from low SES homes identified resources and learning opportunities, such as library membership, and parents who emphasize and value learning from home (Merlo, Bowman & Barnett, 2007). Solutions proposed to close the achievement gap often involve parental involvement, such as high parent expectations and parent participation at school activities, however, parents of students from low-SES situations of African-American descent often have limited involvement in

schools due to lack of education, employment constraints, mistrust of the academic system, and a pervasive attitude that learning is the "job" of the school, not the home (Ogbu, 2003). An Ansalone (2001) study equates student achievement to a combination of family background and individual student attitude toward learning as the greatest factors impacting student achievement.

Society

The opinions of society also play a vital role in determining student achievement. A study has been conducted to determine if high achieving minorities are forced to reject their cultural heritage to be successful. Carter (2008) suggests that successful black students in traditional school environments adopt a form of "race-less-ness" and conform to the dominant culture in academic areas. Students in studies from Ogbu (2003) identify getting good grades as "acting white" and report being shunned by peers. Students who accuse others of "acting white" may be using a ploy of low-achieving minority students to discourage friends from achieving and receiving good grades for hard work. Successful African-American students and successful African-American professionals may be accused by peers of abandoning their racial identity, beginning at the high school level and continuing into adulthood (Ogbu, 2003). A study by Henfield et al. (2008) determined that the scarcity of African-American students in gifted programs in schools is a result of significant "psychological distress" that the placement in gifted programs may cause African-American students.

One long-term solution to the problem of minority achievement lies in the opinion of society. According to Gardner (2007),

> The achievement gap will begin to disappear when attitudes in this country begin to change, when eliminating poverty becomes a national priority. It will begin to disappear when racism is recognized as the pervasive and insidious cancer that it is and when Americans are united in their willingness to do something about it. (p. 545)

To date, schools have applied hundreds, perhaps even thousands of programs and processes devoted to improving achievement for African-American students (Poplin & Soto-Hinman, 2006). However, programs that focus merely on student achievement, without considering and including considerations for the social support necessary to impact a lasting change, may not provide all that struggling students need to change the tide of sinking achievement (Berzin, 2010). Ultimately, it is imperative to change not just the achievement of struggling students, but to change the attitudes and beliefs of society related to schools and the diversity within schools today (Lynn, 2006).

Schools

Successful schools for low-SES minority students do exist and are more plentiful than most people realize (Scheurich, 1998). Many elementary schools demonstrate a success rate that contradicts the typical assumption that academic failure is related to low-SES background, minority status, parental upbringing or genetics (Scheurich, 1998). Gerardi (1990) identifies one quality of successful students hailing from minority and low SES backgrounds as a positive self-concept. The study further posits that minority students from low SES backgrounds must overcome significant obstacles to obtain a quality education hence a strong self-concept is essential to overcome these barriers

(Gerardi, 1990). Fisher (2005) concurs, stating that the "key contributor" to success of minority students from low SES backgrounds is confidence. Based on further research, students who excel academically and overcome the disadvantages of family influence and poverty identify intrinsic motivation as a factor in their success (Fisher, 2005).

Successful schools with a high proportion of low SES students identify the following factors as being the most influential in terms of student achievement: instruction, reading and writing, perseverance and persistence, and engagement (Cunningham, 2006). Additionally, it has been proven that regular assessment of low SES students and use of these assessments to guide instruction is identified as the most powerful factor in bringing about success with typically failing students (Cunningham, 2006). Clearly, success is attainable if the right methods and tools are used.

Summary of Research

Although a variety of reasons have been attributed to the lack of success African-American students experience in the academic setting (Henfield et al., 2008; Ingram et al., 2007; and Roscigno et al., 2006), there is a small population of students who demonstrate success in the academic setting (Goff, Martin & Thomas, 2007). This study examines some of the key factors that contribute to that success and to discover the factors that these students identify as being the most significant factors in academic success for students from rural, low-income families. The study seeks to find out, through the voices of the students, what factors make them successful in school when they come from homes and backgrounds that are indicative of academic failure.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study explored African-American, low SES students' ideas, feelings, and thoughts about their academic success in school. A qualitative research paradigm was selected for the study as the appropriate methodology to explore and understand students' perceptions and experiences contributing to their academic success. A phenomenological lens was used to analyze the words and ideas of the students to gain a better understanding of the experiences of study participants. Chapter 3 presents the methodology to be used in addressing the questions posed for the study including the research design and method, selection of study participants, ethical and confidentiality concerns, interview protocols, and data collection procedures. The analysis of the data is articulated as well as the researcher's role in the study and validity concerns in qualitative research.

Research Design

Qualitative and quantitative research paradigms present different ways of researching and addressing different types of research questions. Quantitative research involves the use of numbers, hypotheses, measurement, and statistics to answer the research questions posed for the study. Qualitative research presents the researcher with a different approach. Qualitative research does not typically collect numerical data but collects the words and thoughts of participants. Rather than asking research questions, posing hypotheses, testing and analyzing research participants, qualitative research participants are asked to talk about their experiences, provide individual narratives, to explain, to describe their experiences, and/or feelings (Patton, 2002). Quantitative

research can tell us how groups or subgroups of study participants differ but does not always tell us how or why they differed. In qualitative research, participants can be asked to explain and/or describe their experiences and their reactions in much more detail (why did they do something, why they answered in a particular way). Since the currency of qualitative research is words, participants can describe and tell us why they reacted or felt a particular way (did this or that or how they felt). A qualitative research design was used in this study to explore the attitudes and perceptions of students demonstrating high academic achievement in spite of also being affected by factors often associated with academic failure such as minority, rural setting, and low socioeconomic status. The goal of the study was to understand the broader phenomena rather than focus only on specified variables (Ary et al., 2009).

Patton (2002) suggested several design strategies in qualitative research or inquiry, one being naturalistic. Qualitative designs are naturalistic in that they take place in real world settings, the researcher does not attempt to manipulate/control the topic or phenomenon of interest, there is no predetermined course of action, and the study is allowed to emerge naturally from the words of the participants. Qualitative inquiry is naturalistic in that the researcher is open to adapting the study as understanding deepens, avoids getting locked into a rigid design, remains responsive, and pursues new avenues of interest as they emerge. This study utilized a naturalistic approach to the design, implementation, and analysis. The study included the elements identified by Creswell (2007) as components of a qualitative study including use of a natural setting, employing the researcher as the key data collection instrument, use of multiple data sources, use of

an inductive reasoning, use of an emergent design, use of interpretive inquiry, and providing a holistic account.

Qualitative Lens

The design and interpretation of qualitative studies depends upon what lens the researcher chooses to use in viewing the study, analysis and interpretation. The choice of lens through which to plan and view the study and data affects the analysis and interpretation of the data. Philosophically, this study assumed a phenomenological lens. Phenomenology asks what the meaning or structure of the experience is for a person or group of people (Fischer & Wertz, 1978; Patton, 2002). While there are various definitions of phenomenology and depending upon who is doing the defining, phenomenology has come to be understood as referring to in-depth interviews of individuals actually living through or having direct experience with the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). The phenomenon of interest can be an emotion, a relationship, organization, achievement, or culture. In this study, the phenomenon of interest was achievement, emotions, and a relationship. The phenomenon of interest was the relationship between the achievement of young African-Americans of low SES status in school and their experiences, relationships, and emotions in attaining this academic achievement. Conducting a study with a phenomenological approach involves seeking the essence of the phenomenon of interest, and this study concentrated on the descriptions and experiences study participants reported with no preconceived ideas about what the participants would say. The study utilized an emergent approach to the study planning and analysis. Participants were encouraged to tell their stories, in their own voices, and

these voices and stories were used to understand how some African-American students from rural low SES areas were able to achieve and excel in school.

This phenomenological study sought to "describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomena" (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). According to Ary et al. (2009), the central question of a phenomenological study is to determine the essence of the experience as "perceived by the participants" (p. 461). In order to accomplish this, data is collected from participants experiencing phenomena of interest. In this study the phenomena of interest was the experiences of African-American students from rural, poverty backgrounds demonstrating academic success. Study participants participated in interviews and observations in an effort to identify factors study participants attribute as contributing to personal academic success.

Guiding Research Questions

While this study used a phenomenological lens to view and interpret the data and a qualitative method to collect the data, even qualitative studies need guidance at the beginning by posing a set of overarching research questions. These overarching questions focused the development of the interview protocol, guided the selection of the study participants, and guided the design of the study. With support from the literature, this study posed the following overarching questions:

1. How do rural low SES African American students describe why they think they are successful in academic pursuits in school?
2. What are the factors affecting the academic achievement of rural low SES African American students?

3. What resources were available to rural low SES African American students to pursue their academic studies?

Study Participants

Patton (2002) noted there are no hard and fast rules for sample size in qualitative research. Sample size can be a trade-off between breadth (larger number of participants) and depth (smaller number of participants). Smaller numbers of participants can be very valuable especially if the participants offer rich information and experiences. The size of the sample depends upon what you want to know, why you want to know this, how findings will be used, and what resources are available to the researcher (Patton, 2002). Exploring why high achieving African-American students from low SES backgrounds think they are successful in school has resulted in sparse prior research. The purpose of this study was not to generalize to all African-American students in grades 3-8 but to understand the variation, diversity, and begin to develop a descriptive understanding of how this particular group of young African-Americans students perceived, understood, and attributed their academic success.

This study used a purposeful sampling framework. Purposeful samples should be evaluated based on the purpose of the study, be judged in context, and how the sample supports the purpose of the study (Patton, 2002). The purpose was to select participants who were information rich and could provide a variety of experiences to enlighten the understanding of the phenomena of interest, the academic success of rural low SES African-Americans. A good informant has the information or knowledge the researcher needs, is willing to reflect on their experiences, and has the time to participate in the study (Patton, 2002). DePoy and Gitlin (1998) suggested between five and ten

participants for a qualitative study, while Creswell (2007) recommends between five and twenty-five participants. Using a purposeful sampling framework, 25 participants were asked to participate in the study.

Students from two elementary and one middle school in the ABC School District, a small rural school district located in a southern state in the United States, were asked to participate in the study. Male and female students between the ages of 8 and 14 years of age were selected for the study based on a set of criteria including the following: enrollment in the ABC school District, being African-American, receiving free or reduced lunch as a measure of SES, scores of advanced or proficient on the spring 2009 administration of the Measure of Academic Progress (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2009), and enrollment in grades 3 to 8 in the district. Based on inspection of school records, a total of 41 students met the eligibility criteria for participation in the study.

An invitation letter (Appendix B) and parental informed consent (Appendix B) and student assent (Appendix B) were prepared and sent to the parents of the 40 students explaining the purpose of the study. Contact information and university affiliation were also shared with parents. The parental consent form and letter indicated participation in the study was voluntary and participation was at the discretion of the parents and participants. Two methods were used to secure parental consent for participation in the study. The first method was to send the introduction letter and consent form (Appendix B) home with eligible students from school during the fall semester 2009. If consent forms were not returned, a follow up letter and consent was sent after 10 days by United States Postal Service and included a postage paid envelope for return. A total of 25 signed consent forms were returned (60.9%) including 14 males (56%) and 11 females

(44%). All students with signed returned consent forms were selected for participation. Table 1 presents descriptive data on the participants agreeing to participate in the study.

Table 1

Descriptive Data on Study Participants by Grade

Grade	*N*	Age	Male (%)	Female (%)
Grade 3	4	8-9	25%	75%
Grade 4	6	9	66.6%	33.3%
Grade 5	4	10-11	50%	50%
Grade 6	4	11-12	75%	25%
Grade 7	1	13	0.0%	100%
Grade 8	6	13	66.6%	33.3%
Total	25	8-13	56%	44%

Setting

The ABC (pseudonym) school district is a small, rural school district serving approximately 1,666 students throughout the county (www.schoolmatters.com). A total of four schools comprise the district including two elementary schools (grades PK-5), one middle school (grades 6-8) and one high school (grades 9-12). Ethnic diversity within the school district was limited and included African Americans (94.7%), Caucasians (2.7%), Hispanics (2.2%) and Other (0.4%). The district has a low SES population with 86.9% of the students labeled as economically disadvantaged and receiving free and reduced lunch (http://www.schoolmatters.com). Little change in district size or demographic make-up has been seen in the district for several years. All schools in the district have been rated *Unsatisfactory* for more than one year on state Department of

Education reporting data. On average, only a small percentage of students at each grade level perform at what is considered proficient or advanced level of performance. The district is ranked 46th out of 46 counties with the lowest wealth per capita in the state. The county also ranks number one in unemployment with a 21.4% unemployment rate, the highest rate in the state (http://www.sccounties-scac.org). The district is in a low SES county, is predominately African-American, scores below average on standardized testing; however, some students overcome their background and thrive and succeed in academic pursuits. It is important to explore what it is in the students and their thinking impelling them to succeed and how this might also be imparted to other similar students. Table 2 illustrates the number and percentage of student in the district assessed and scored as proficient/not met in mathematics and English.

Table 2

ABC School District Grades 3-8 All Students' State Exam Proficiency Levels

		English Language Arts				Mathematics			
		Prof/Adv		Not Met		Prof/Adv		Not Met	
Grade	Enroll	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Grade 3	130	60	46	70	54	45	35	85	65
Grade 4	113	45	40	68	60	40	35	73	65
Grade 5	122	61	50	61	50	37	30	85	70
Grade 6	120	42	35	78	65	22	18	87	72
Grade 7	110	43	39	67	61	40	36	70	64
Grade 8	88	39	44	49	56	34	38	54	62

Data Procedures and Collection

The first step in the data collection and procedures was to obtain approval to conduct the study from Liberty University. The research methodology and procedures were presented to the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review in April 2009. Following two requests for clarification or additional information, the IRB was approved on September 20, 2009 (Appendix A). The second step was to identify potential participants by reviewing MAP data (Northwest Educational Laboratory, 2009) by searching the data for those students in grades 3 – 8 designated as proficient or advanced. The records of proficient or advanced students were then reviewed to ensure each was an African-American and received free or reduced lunch. When the pool of possible student had been identified, information letters, informed consent, and assent forms were sent home with students for completion (Appendix B). If no response was received within 10 days, an additional copy of the cover letter and informed consent was sent by postal service requesting parental consent for the student to participate in the study. Consent was obtained during the fall 2009 semester and data collection began during the spring semester of 2010 and was completed by June 2010.

The study was a phenomenological qualitative study. This type of design served to describe the "meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). The focus of the study was to identify what all the participants have in common as they experience the phenomenon, in this case, high academic achievement. Qualitative research needs to address credibility as part of the structure of the study. According to Ary et al. (2009) "a combination of data sources such as interviews, observations, and relevant documents and the use of different

methods increase the likelihood that the phenomenon under study is being understood from various points of view" (p. 505). The study used a system of methods to provide confidence the conclusions, observations, and interpretations were accurate (Ary et al.). The study used three data sources including: Tier 1 Individual Student Interviews, Tier 2 Student Classroom Observations, and Tier 3 Follow up Interviews with Photographs were used to determine whether or not there was agreement between sources and whether these supported the conclusions reached throughout the study. The use of student interviews was important to the integrity of the study since the goal was to identify what factors the students identified as contributing to their academic success. The interviews allowed the voice of the students to be reflected in the data collected in the study and the three tiers of data collection were used increased the credibility of the findings.

Triangulating the three data sources, student interview, classroom observations, and interviews with photographs provided the ability to triangulate the data between the three sources. The purpose of each data source, collection method, and use are detailed below. Triangulation was used to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the qualitative data and was part of an audit trail used by the researcher. Patton (2002) describes analyst triangulation as being the use of multiple analysts or multiple sources of data rather than just one. This provided a bias check on the data and assessed the consistency of the analysis. Rubin and Babbie (2001) discussed the consistency between different analysts as a type of inter-rater reliability. There is also a possibility the interactions between the critical friend/auditor and the researcher/analyst might influence the search for deeper meaning in the data (Padgett, 1998). However, during the analysis the researcher also worked with the critical friend/auditor and made every effort to ensure a deeper structure

was identified and contamination was kept at a minimum. The critical/friend or analyst has a Doctor of Philosophy degree and more than 20 years of experience in qualitative research as well as being an instructor at the graduate level in qualitative methodologies.

Tier 1– Individual Student Interviews

Initial interviews were conducted with identified student participants. Semi-structured interviews were used to ensure that each participant in the research study experiences the same general line of questioning regarding the topic; however, follow up questions based on responses were left up to the discretion of the researcher. The semi-structured method provided a systematic framework to the interview while still allowing the flexibility to divert from the interview questions and ask follow up questions of specific participants (Henfield et al., 2008). Interviews were audio recorded with transcription following the conclusion of each interview. Interview questions were open-ended in nature and are as follows:

1. How do you feel about school?
2. How important is your education to you?
3. How much control do you believe you have over your education?
4. What things do you feel are most important in you getting good grades at school?

The interview questions were developed for this study based on the literature to be understandable to the age group of students and in cooperation with other experts in the field. According to Ary et al. (2009), the interview questions should be developed in an open-ended and non-directional way to meet the intended purpose of the study. The questions for this study were intended to have "both social meaning and personal significance" to the participants (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104). Moustakas (1994) provided

general guidelines for interview questions. These guidelines included that interview questions should reflect a variety of requirements. Requirements included: seeking to delve into the true meaning of the intended topic; highlighting the human experience; serving to engage the participant(s); seeking to identify qualitative factors, designed to eliminate preconceived notions or perceptions or establish cause and effect relationships; and obtain an accurate account of the experiences of the participants. VanManan (1990) directed qualitative researchers to ask simple questions about what it is like to have a certain experience in a language easily understood by the participants. The interview questions were reviewed by the dissertation committee, former committee chairperson, and doctoral consultant and revised as necessary to ensure they were understandable to the students and obtained the information needed for the study.

Tier 2– Student Classroom Observations

During the second tier of data collection, the participants were observed in the classroom setting by an independent observer to compare and contrast classroom behaviors with that of peers in an academic setting. The observer was trained by the researcher how to observe students in the classroom and had completed similar tasks in the district for other projects including observing students for learning or discipline problems in the classroom. Observations were conducted during either Mathematics or English/Language Arts classes since the criteria used for selection of participants was focused on Math and English/Language Arts performance on the MAP (Northwest Educational Laboratory, 2009) testing. A tally method (Appendix F) was used and observations were made at thirty-second intervals during a fifteen-minute observation period. The targeted behavior was the student being on-task or off-task during the

observation period. As an observation check, the researcher observed another student at 30 second intervals in the class of the same gender during the same 15 minute intervals noting on and off task behavior. On and off task behavior was selected for the study since if a student is not attending, paying attention, or completing assigned tasks in a learning situation it is difficult for the student to be learning (Gredler, 2009; Snowman, McCown & Bhieler, 2008).

Tier 3– Follow up Interviews with Photographs

The third tier of data collection involved a second interview with the participating students. Each of the participants was given a disposable camera to photograph people, places, or things they identified as aiding and assisting them in becoming academic high achievers. A scripted explanation of the purpose of the disposable cameras was used (Appendix D). Seven to 10 days after receiving the camera, the cameras were collected and the film was developed. Separate interviews with each participant were then held after the film was developed. Interviews were conducted in a quiet room or conference room away from other students and lasted between 10 and 20 minutes.

The interviews with participants and the developed photographs provided opportunities for participants to discuss with the researcher the photographs they had taken. In the interviews, students were asked to examine the photographs with the researcher and discuss why they thought this person was influential in their success and how did the person help or inspire them to succeed. The following semi-structured interview method was used to guide interviews are as follows:

1) Why did you select this subject for your picture?

2) How did the subject of this picture help you to do well in school?

In discussion with a faculty advisor, students not returning the disposable camera were still interviewed about pictures they took. Cameras were returned by 20 (80%) of the 25 students. Students forgetting to return the camera so the photographs could be developed were asked what they had taken photographs of and how the photograph explained their success in school. The photograph interviews were conducted identically, only 5 of the students did not have photographs to look at but they were able to tell the researcher what the photograph was and why it was important.

Researcher Role

The researcher's role in this study included conducting interviews, analyzing data, and recording and interpreting the data collected for this phenomenological study. At the time the data was collected, the researcher was an employee of the district identified for the study. However, knowledge of the participants in the study or interaction with the participants prior to conducting the first phase of interviews was minimal. My role, at the time of the study in the organization did not bring me into direct contact with any of the study participants except during the course of the study. However, my experience in the field of education has been almost exclusively in settings where the majority of the students are both low SES and high minority while my background as a Caucasian, middle to high SES individual provides me with a different perspective from the study participants. At the present time, I am no longer affiliated with the ABC school district, nor do I have any further professional relationship with the district, staff, or students. My role as a researcher involved being objective and collecting and analyzing data shared by

participants. I viewed the data through the eyes and words of the participants sharing their perceptions, experiences, and knowledge.

I entered the study with the mindset of discovering information with no preconceived notions as to what the results of the study might be and was genuinely interested in hearing the voices of the study participants. I have had experience working with students of this age and the use of open-ended, semi-structured interview questions was completed with minor deviation when circumstances were warranted within the context of the interview.

Being honest about one's biases relating to the topic being researched and the participants interviewed was essential to this study. Conscious efforts were made to be introspective regarding the thoughts and feelings about the students and their academic success. Field notes, self-directed memos, and journals were utilized to accomplish this type of accountability. Borkan (1999) reported this approach as being reflective and uses the term reflexivity. Reflexivity includes the researcher turning the focus or reflection on oneself to identify what may have been influencing their thinking, their own feelings, how they were looking at the research, and what might be influencing the results or interpretation. I reflected on my biases relative to the study before, during, and after completing this qualitative study. Field notes help the researcher keep in touch with her own biases and realize when, where, and how bias might occur during the course of the data analysis. Notes and memos will be added to and reviewed during the course of the analysis to assess whether researcher bias might be affecting the analysis. If it appears bias might be affecting the analysis, notes will be read and reflected on by the researcher.

Notes assisted the researcher identify possible bias and discuss with the external auditor whether bias affected the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Once each individual and picture interview was completed, I transcribed the information for each participant and the data analysis began. Data analysis and data collection was a circular process and planning for the analysis began as soon as the data was available and while some interviews had not taken place. This practice reflected the emergent characteristic of qualitative design since the study emerged as it took place (Patton, 2002). Several copies were made of the original interview transcripts for initial reading and notes, coding, and analysis.

There are few agreed upon rules or conventions for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The challenge of qualitative data is to make sense of the piles of data by reducing the sheer amount of data, sifting out the trivial, finding patterns, illuminating the significant, identifying what is the essence or what is important in this set of informational data, and communicating that information (Patton, 2002). It was necessary for the researcher/analyst to develop the insights and the skills necessary to make sense of this data and let the analysis emerge from the data. These skills were developed through the literature review as well as through my experience in the field of education over the past fifteen years. At the same time, the analyst needed to monitor the analytical processes, procedures, and be as honest and truthful as possible (Patton, 2002).

In using a phenomenological approach to analysis I sought to illuminate the meaning, structure, and experiences of a group of people about phenomena (Patton,

2002). The first step in the analysis was to read each interview in its entirety, only after reading at least one time could the data analysis begin. While reading the data, notes were made on the transcripts about general ideas and thoughts as they came up in the data. A constant comparison method was used in the analysis. Constant comparison is an inductive analysis technique comparing coding and categories to ensure they are still applicable during the entire analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The data was coded, bracketed, and all aspects of the data and all perspectives had equal value. Data was then organized into clusters or categories with irrelevant, repetitive material eliminated. Through this analysis, the researcher sought to identify a structural description of the experiences of a group of people. The phenomenological analysis looked for the affect inherent in the experience to the deeper meaning for the individuals who made up the group (Patton, 2002). The meaning of the data emerged from the data through the use of systematic rigor (Patton, 2002). After reading the data several times to become familiar with the content and make notes, ideas began to emerge about what the data was saying. The analyst/researcher read the data and made notes, in the margins, used Post-it notes, and gathered ideas from the data (Patton, 2002). Once the data had been read several times, the data coding process began.

Developing a meaningful and useful coding scheme or method of classifying qualitative data was important in beginning to understand the data. Codes could be phrases, sentences, and even paragraphs. These codes were small units of data and the researcher/analyst attached a meaningful label or title to each code. The codes were defined and the parameters developed for the labeled and coded pieces of data. Using a constant comparison method (Patton, 2002), other pieces or portions of data were

compared to the parameters of each code and those fitting into a code are then coded with the appropriate label. Because the analysis of qualitative data is a fluid and flexible process, during the course of the data analysis, codes can change, be dropped from the analysis, be combined with other codes and, new codes were continually being added as the data was analyzed. Thus, beginning with the unfocused coding and moving to descriptive coding, a finite set of pattern codes were developed (Patton, 2002).

When all of the data had been coded and code definitions established, a critical friend/auditor, using code definitions provided by the researcher (Appendix G), coded a selection of data again. The object was to determine whether the researcher and critical friend/auditor would code the data in a similar way. A level of agreement/concordance between the two coders (researcher and critical friend/auditor) was calculated using the selected portions of the data with a high level of agreement identified. Minor differences between the two coders were discussed and found to be primarily attributable to different ways of using and understanding words. However, due to the simple responses of the subjects and the clear coding definitions, little deviation was noted and agreement exceeded 95 percent. Due to the high agreement/concordance between the two coders I determined that the coding was sufficient to continue analysis of the data. Working separately, the critical friend/auditor was asked periodically during the analysis and interpretation of the data to again to check codes, categories, and themes emerging from the data for agreement with the researcher and any differences were again discussed and reflected on until agreement was reached.

Analysis of qualitative data requires pulling apart the data and then reassembling the data into something that is meaningful and can be communicated (Patton, 2002).

Once the coded data had been reviewed, the codes were studied to determine where the codes appear to come together to make up a larger more encompassing category. Categories represented larger ideas or constructs (Patton, 2002). Each category emerging from the coded data was defined and using constant comparison, each code was placed into a category if it fit the definition for that category.

In addition to the coding method, graphs were used to display the data found throughout the study (Appendix G). Data related to the categories developed during the coding process for both Tier 1 and Tier 3 interviews was graphed. Comparisons of Tier 1 and Tier 3 data was conducted in graphic form and significant differences or similarities were noted. Additionally, student observation data provided information related to student conduct of student participants when compared to randomly selected peers in a classroom environment.

Trustworthiness

One component essential to qualitative research is the ability to demonstrate a provision of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness involves the extent to which the study findings can be trusted, is one dimension of methodological rigor, and is tied to the trustworthiness of the person collecting and analyzing the data (Patton, 2002). Trustworthiness reflects on the competence of the researcher and is demonstrated through verification and validation used to establish the quality of the work (Patton). This implies the researcher needs to provide information to the reader allowing the reader to consistently reproduce the same study based on the information provided in the study. Information provided in this study included the rationale for qualitative research, the

phenomenological research design, the data sources being used, as well as the process for collecting and analyzing the data.

In qualitative research, variability is expected as the more subjective research design of a qualitative study lacks the ability to provide the rigid structure demonstrated in quantitative research (Ary et. al, 2006). An audit trail allows a qualitative researcher to keep a close record of the data collected and to allow for explanations when variances occur increasing the neutrality of the study. Data collection methods were thoroughly outlined throughout the study. The researcher kept documentation of all data collection methods and will save all research materials related to the study for a period of five years following the conclusion of the study. Data logs included dates, location of interviews, and an interviewer's log noting the timeline and rationale for all data collection. A third party auditor reviewed the audit trail during the course of the study and will make suggestions to the researcher as to additional documentation needed. The third party auditor or critical friend is a doctoral level instructor in research methods, especially qualitative methods. Study participants were asked to review their typed interviews as a measure of trustworthiness; however, none of the study participants opted to review their interviews or the interpretation of these interviews. The researcher also kept notes of possible bias, concerns, and possible interpretations throughout the study. These notes were reviewed frequently and discussions held with the critical friend during the course of the study to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Methods triangulation was used to identify the consistency of the findings generated by using different data collection methods. Differing methods of data collection were selected to balance and counterbalance the margin of error in each

method. This study used participant interviews, on-task observations, and photographs with interviews to compare responses, assure completeness and confirm accuracy of findings. The use of the on-task observations was used to determine whether study participants were observed to be on-task substantially more that same sex randomly selected peers. Use of both interviews as well as quantitative data from on-task observations provided a blending of qualitative and quantitative approaches to merge the findings of all data sources to determine a more consistent outcome. The two forms of qualitative data, the participant interview and the photograph interview provided a better understanding of the phenomena under study by comparing answers through two similar data collection methods.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent

Every researcher has an obligation to protect their subjects from harm, deception, preserve confidentiality, and obtain informed consent prior to beginning any study. Participants were not being deceived in any manner and, the subject of this study involved their perceptions explanations about why they thought they might be successful in school. Informed consent was obtained from parents and assent from participants prior to beginning the study so the participants understood the topic of the study and knew they could withdraw from the study at any time and request that data on them not be used. Participants were not being subjected to any harm. There were no apparent signs of distress exhibited by the participants during the interviews about academic success.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality in a qualitative study presents a slightly different set of problems than those found in quantitative research. There is always a challenge presented to the researcher of having intimate knowledge of the participant and the necessity of always preserving to the extent possible the anonymity of participants. Because many students have difficulty trusting adults, every effort was made to protect the participant's privacy. Assent forms were reviewed with each participant and the signed assent and consent forms were kept separately from any data in a separate locked file. The consent forms were destroyed at the end of the study. Participants also had the option of selecting a pseudonym or having the researcher assign them a pseudonym to be used in communicating the results of this study. All participants opted to have the researcher select a pseudonym for them.

Summary

The purpose of the study is to examine the factors that target student (African-American, rural, and low-income) identified as factors contributing to school success. The participants were third through eighth grade students who demonstrated academic success in a small, rural school district. Using individual student interviews, student classroom observations, and follow up interviews with photographs; data was collected, coded and categorized using the constant comparative method. Issues of trustworthiness and research bias were examined along with a description of data sources and methods that were used. An explanation and justification for the research design was described. The next chapter; Chapter 4: Analysis of Data will show the student results to the three tiers of data collection used during the study. Data was organized into categories from all

three tiers of data sources (Individual Interview, Classroom Observations, and Follow up Interviews with Photographs) discussed in this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the reasons for high academic achievement of students from low SES backgrounds in a rural public school setting. The study used participants in grades 3 – 8, aged 8 -14, demonstrating high academic achievement. The study used individual student interviews (Tier 1), classroom observations (Tier 2), and photographs taken by study participants with follow up interviews (Tier 3) to determine the factors participants identified as contributing to high academic achievement. This approach allowed the researcher to provide data from three separate data sources to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. This chapter is organized in terms of the research questions used in Tier 1, the results of the classroom observations, and the research questions used in Tier 3 discussing the student photographs. The results are presented in text and tables, with a summary of the findings concluding the chapter.

Participants

Study participants were students selected from two elementary and one middle school in a small rural school district in the United States. Male and female students between the ages of 8 and 14 years of age were selected for the study based on a set of criteria. Criteria for selection included the following: being African American, receiving free or reduced lunch as a measure of SES, scores of advanced or proficient on the spring 2009 administration of the Measure of Academic Progress (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2009), and enrollment in grades 3 to 8 in the district. Based on inspection of

school records, a total of 40 students within the district met the eligibility criteria for participation in the study, while 25 consented to participate in the study.

Table 3 presents descriptive data on the participants in the study.

Table 3 *Interview Participant's Demographic Information*

Student Participant	Gender	Grade
Adam	M	5
Betty	F	5
Carl	M	5
Diane	F	5
Ellie	F	3
Fiona	F	3
Greg	M	4
Harold	M	4
Ivan	M	4
Jill	F	4
Karen	F	4
Leon	M	4
Matt	M	6
Paul	M	6
Nancy	F	6
Quinn	M	6
Rob	M	8
Steve	M	8
Todd	M	8
Ursula	F	8
Valerie	F	8
Will	M	8
Ann	F	3
Brad	M	3
Connie	F	7

Data Analysis Tier 1

Themes were developed to identify the 'voice' of each interviewee through their ideas and beliefs in response to each research question. Each theme was developed through a data analysis process including review of transcripts, coding, coding additional data, and reducing the data to manageable categories or themes. Before the themes were identified, the transcripts were read several times prior to any coding taking place. First the data was coded with a common code identified as a small unit of the data, a phrase, a word, a sentence or sentences. Code definitions were frequently revised as needed through a process of continual constant comparison of new codes of data with the old codes. Whenever a new code was needed, it was defined and created with the parameters set for inclusion. Once all of the data had been coded, the codes were reviewed and analyzed to see if larger categories existed encompassing several smaller codes categories. Categories were created by combining codes with an underlying idea and representing a more inclusive idea or category. Once the codes were reduced to categories and categories were defined, an additional data reduction step was taken to place the data to essential themes. This process was repeated for all Tier 1 research questions and the report of the emerging themes is recounted below.

Tier One Question One

Question 1. How do you feel about school?

Three themes were identified from the responses to Tier 1, Question 1 when study participants were asked to discuss feelings about school, these included education, friends, and achieving future goals.

Education

One of the themes identified in response to Tier 1 Question 1 (T1Q1) was education. This included references to the importance of learning, education and school. Study participants described emotions about school by the following statement from Adam, "…a process for learning", as Diane stated, "…school is great for you to learn**"**, and Karen expressed, "I feel happy about school because I can learn as much as I want." Overall, respondents identified the need for an education in 13 of 25 responses making education the predominant theme addressed by the student participants when asked how they felt about school. Interviewees also made statements to reflect their feelings as Ursula commented, "I love school cuz I love to read and learn."

Ann stated "School is important for you to get your education ", and Carl stated, "I feel that it's a good thing to get an education."

Friends

The second theme addressed in T1Q1 was friends. This included both positive and negative responses toward peer influence. Positive responses included a desire to be with friends and enjoying the social aspects of coming to school to see friends. Negative responses included references to ignoring others who did not pay attention and learning in spite of outside influences. The responses related to friends were included in 6 of the 25 responses to this question. Interviewees used examples of positive influences of peers.

Steve said, "I come to see friends like that's mostly like close to the end of the school year", while Nancy said, "I like seeing my friends."

Will demonstrated motivation from peers to even go to school by the statement, "the only reason I got potty trained was because I wanted to come to school like my older brother so that's why I started and the stuff just started clicking, you know, liking it better." Negative influences of peers were also noted.

Todd said, "Some of the students in my class too are really childish and I don't really like that so…"

Betty stated, "You don't come to school just to eat and yell."

Future Orientation

The third theme emerging through response to Question 1 included student aspirations for achievement including: getting good jobs, going to college, or obtaining a particular job in the future. Students mentioned future employment, attending college, and becoming a better person. Overall, 9 of 25 responses included comments fitting into the category of Future Orientation. Student responses demonstrated a desire for future employment opportunities. "So you can get a good job," said Carl.

Ann stated she wanted to, "go and get a nice job when you grow up." Additionally, several study participants indicated a desire to attend college.

Karen expressed this by the statement, "I can go to college and get my degree and my education." and "I want to go to college to do hair, to be a technician."

Finally interviewees identified the need for becoming a better person. "…You gonna have a future for yourself, according to Diane.

While Harold stated, **"**I can get somewhere in life when I grow up."

Summary

Overall, students in the study identified positive feelings when asked the question, "How do you feel about school?" These positive feelings included using school and education to improve oneself or one's station in life, interacting with friends while ignoring negative peer influences and attaining future goals. All 25 of the study participants expressed positive feelings toward school during the Tier 1 interviews.

Tier One Question Two

Question 2. How important is your education to you?

Four themes were identified from the responses to Tier 1, Question 2 (T1Q2) when study participants were asked to discuss the importance of education, these included learning, parents, future goals, and importance.

Future Goals

One theme addressed in T1Q2 was future goals. This theme included references to future education, aspirations of higher education, or identified specific jobs that the participants wanted to pursue later in life. Participants described the importance of education in terms of future education and higher education goals.

Paul stated, "Well, good because I want to get a Master's degree and a diploma."

Nancy also made mention about future goals in her statement, "Very important because I want to get into a good college and graduate."

While Ursula echoed the comments by saying, "I want straight A's because I want to go to college and have a good job."

Interviewees also identified specific employment goals when asked about the importance of education.

Fiona stated, “I want to be either a artist or a person who helps stray animals.”

Matt made the statement, “I might want to be a doctor.”

Todd stated, “It’s really important because of the job that I want to get when I graduate from high school. I plan on going to college so I can get a degree in veterinary medicine.”

While Valerie said, “I see myself being something like a song writer or a writer.”

Overall, 22 of the 25 participants identified future goals when they discussed the importance of their education during the Tier 1 interviews making future goals the predominant theme addressed by student participants when asked how important education was to them.

Importance

The second theme emerging from response to Question 2 included affirming the importance of education and mention of how important getting an education was specifically in the response to the question. Overall 17 of the 25 respondents mentioned the word important in response to the question. Responses typically included the words “very important” and “really important” when discussing education. Examples included: Diane commenting, “It’s important to me because when I grow up I want to be a musician. I want to achieve my goal.”

Todd stating, “It’s really important because of the job that I want to get when I graduate from high school. I plan on going to college so I can get a degree in veterinary medicine.”

Brad saying, **“**My education is really important to me because when I grow up I want to go to college and get a degree and grow up as a veterinarian.”

Fiona commenting, “My education is very important to me because I want to be so many things and I know that I need an education to get what I want.”

Learning

The third theme found T1Q2 responses included learning. This included references to the need for an education to achieve in life. Quinn summed up his feelings, “Because without an education you won’t go anywhere.”

Fiona added, “Because I want to be so many things and I know that I need an education to get what I want.”

Adam agreed, “That way you can strive and learn.” This code was reported by 5 of the 25 respondents.

Parents

The fourth theme identified in response to T1Q2 was parents. This included references to a parent or parents impacting the participants view about the importance of education. Although only 2 of 25 participants included mention of parents, the response were telling and demonstrated a deep belief in the value of education within the family unit.

Ivan stated, “My mom always had made me study. If I wouldn’t study I wouldn’t…come nuttin’ in life.”

Karen said, “It’s very, very important because I can like improve my grades and I can do my work in school and get a job and help my family.”

Summary

Study participants indicated a high level of importance when asked, “How important is your education to you?” The overwhelming response identified the need for

education whether to attain future goals, for continued learning or as emphasized by parents. Most of the study participants identified a high level of importance associated with an education from both internal and external influences.

Tier One Question Three

Question 3. How much control do you believe you have over your education?

Four themes were identified from the responses to Tier 1, Question 3 (T1Q3) when study participants were asked to discuss feelings about the amount of control they had over their own education, these included choice, most/all, some or little, and teacher.

Most/All

One of the themes emerging from the responses to T1Q3 was that participants characterizing their control over their own education to be most/all a personal responsibility. This included responses that depicted high percentages, or comments like most of it, a lot, or all of it. Of the 25 respondents, 22 participants provided responses falling into this theme, making this theme the most predominant theme for T1Q3.

Karen explained, "As much control as I need to learn as much to get through college and do my work in school."

Steve said, "I think I have a lot of control over my education."

Harold stated, "Lots…because um, I get on the honor roll."

Matt said, "A lot. I pay attention in class."

Choice

The second theme in response to T1Q3 was choice. These responses involved participants indicating they had a choice in whether or not to get the most out of their education or to put little effort and attention to education. Overall, 14 of 25 participants

mentioned the opportunity to choose whether to take advantage of education or to reject the benefits of getting an education.

Betty said, “You can get an education or not it’s your choice and I choose to get mine.”

Nancy stated, “It’s my choice to do my work and it’s my choice to do other stuff.”

Brad said, “’Cuz like I don’t follow up like when kids are trying to talk to me when the teacher doing a lesson, I don’t try to join them.”

Carl stated, “It’s up to me whether I wanna learn or not.”

Teacher

The third theme identified from T1Q3 involved teacher control over participant ability to gain an education. Responses included choices teachers make in what to teach, being fair about grading, and ability to manage classrooms impacting the learning environment. Overall, 4 of the 25 participants mentioned teachers as having control over student education.

Ellie stated, “Because some kids they be trying to distract you so you can hear what your teacher said and…so like if she give you a test and you forget all the things that’s because of the person who distracted you.”

Todd added, “It’s up to the teachers to get the grades in and they have to do that correctly ‘cuz if they do it incorrectly mess up my grades.”

Will stated, “’Cuz the teachers just teach what they want to teach and then sometimes they don’t answer all my questions, I be getting upset.”

Brad stated, “’Cuz like I don’t follow up like when kids are trying to talk to me when the teacher doing a lesson.”

Some/Little

The fourth theme was only mentioned by 1 of 25 study participants and it indicated that the participant felt little control over education. This participant indicated in response to T1Q3, "I have some control like kind of like 35% control over it like doing my work," according to Todd.

Summary

The majority of study participants indicated they had a great deal of control when asked, "How much control do you believe you have over your education?" Many study participants also indicated they had control, but also had choices related to getting the most out of their education, but were somewhat dependent on teachers to assist with getting the most out of the educational experience. Only one study participant felt he only had a small amount of control over his education.

Tier One Question Four

Question 4. What things do you feel are most important in you getting good grades at school?

Three themes were identified from the responses to Tier 1, Question 4 (T1Q4) when study participants were asked to discuss the most important factors in high academic achievement and included hard work/study, person, and reward/punishment.

Hard Work/Study

One of the themes identified in response to Tier 1 Question 4 (T1Q4) was hard work/study. This included references to listening, studying, and getting work done. Study participants identified important things as: "Listening, paying attention," said Betty.

Carl said, “Reading and studying.”

Harold stated, “Getting my work done in class.”

Rob said, “Taking notes, class work and everything.”

Ann stated, “Listening, doing what I am asked to do.”

Overall, 14 of 25 interviewees identified hard work and/or studying as an important factor in earning good grades at school making hard work/studying as the predominant theme. Interviewees further made statements to reflect their feelings including: “I think…you have to work hard, be a good listener, and don’t follow up other students who are trying to distract you,” said Ellie.

Valerie stated, “Studying, working hard, and keeping confidence in yourself so you know you can do it.”

While Will said, “Doing my work, doing my homework, paying attention, sometimes I have to take notes, but I just remember stuff.”

Person

The second theme in response to T1Q4 was how another person was important in the participant getting good grades at school. This included family members, teachers, and others outside of the participant themselves. Study responses identified another person as contributing to success at school and were mentioned by 10 out of 25 participants.

Greg said, “My parents help giving me confidence.”

Ivan stated, “My grandma she explains things for me..”

Will said, “Now and then if I need it, teachers help me sometimes.”

"…my mom and my dad make me study a lot at home to make sure, they stay on me make sure I get my grades, and the teachers, if we couldn't understand the lesson fully during that school day they will allow us to stay after school and help us out even further with the work," said Steve.

Reward/Punishment

The third theme emerging through the response to T1Q4 included students identifying rewards or punishments as a factor important to being successful at school. Only 2 of 25 interviewees identified this theme, however, the responses were interesting and warranted creating a separate theme for the responses.

Adam replied, "Cuz I get rewarded. I'm rewarded for the good grades I get."

"That I get a lot of awards and that my mother and father are proud of me," said Greg.

Summary

Study participants identified a variety of contributing factors to success when asked, "What things do you feel are most important in you getting good grades at school?" The majority of respondents immediately identified hard work or studying as something they could control as the key to success while others identified external forces such as a particular person or people or rewards and punishments were most important in contributing to academic success.

Tier 2: Classroom Observations

The classroom observation was used to examine the on-task/off-task behavior of target students and one similar researcher-selected peer in either a Math or an English/Language Arts class for each target student in the sample. On Task Behavior

was defined as: the student looking at or toward the educational stimuli. Examples included looking at a workbook/textbook, looking at the teacher during instruction, looking at a classmate during group discussion, or completing an independent assignment. The on-task behavior sample was a moment in time where the observer records the behavior at a specified point in time. Each box on the chart (Appendix F) represents a one-second interval. The observer looked at the target the first second of his thirty-second observation interval and tallied a mark if the student was on task. At the onset of the second thirty-second interval, the observer looked at the random peer and tallied a mark if the peer was on-task. At the onset of the next thirty-second interval, the observer looked at the target student again and repeated this cycle for the entire fifteen-minute observation. A percentage was then calculated for the target as well as the randomly selected peer to determine and compare on-task behavior during the observation period.

Analysis

An outside observer who was trained in both the observation instrument used and in student observation conducted observations of study participants. The observer was a Master's level behavior interventionist and counselor working with school and students in both private psychology office as well as in public school systems. Observations were conducted during a two-week period following the Tier 1 interview phase of data collection. The researcher identified target student study participants and the observer randomly selected a same sex peer. All student participants were observed in either English or Math class during a 15-minute observation. Specific results are outlined in the Table 4, Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Table 4 *Observations On Task Behaviors*

Student Participant	% On Task	Peer % On Task
Adam	75	63
Betty	75	56
Carl	81	44
Diane	81	81
Ellie	88	75
Fiona	63	75
Greg	69	81
Harold	88	63
Ivan	81	93
Jill	75	81
Karen	63	43
Leon	93	88
Matt	75	81
Paul	81	69
Nancy	93	75
Quinn	75	75
Rob	88	81
Steve	75	63
Todd	69	56
Ursula	75	63
Valerie	81	81
Will	93	69
Ann	63	88
Brad	88	75
Connie	75	81

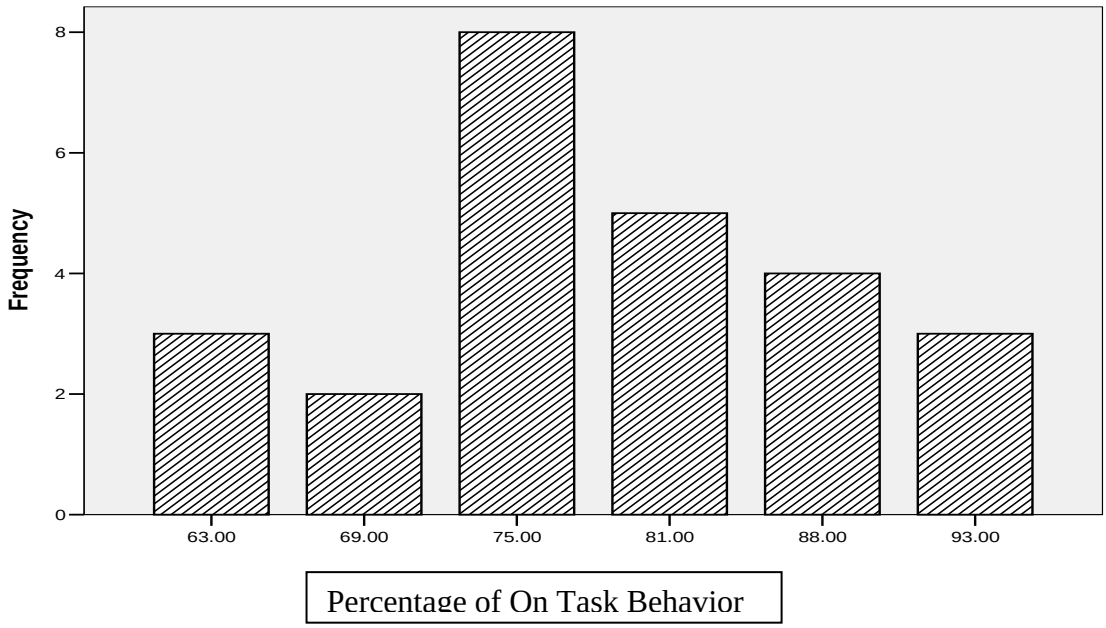


Figure 1. *Participant on task behaviors*

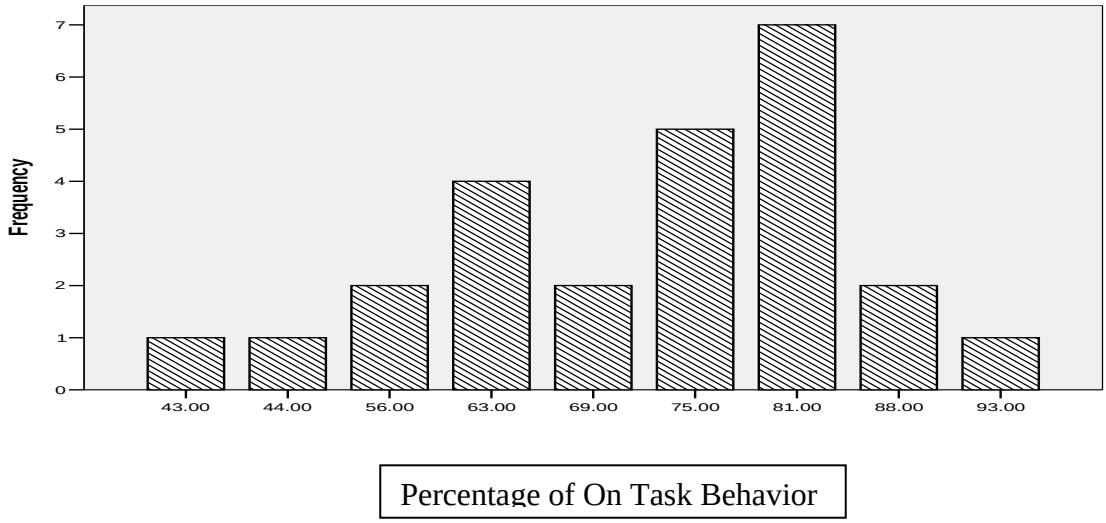
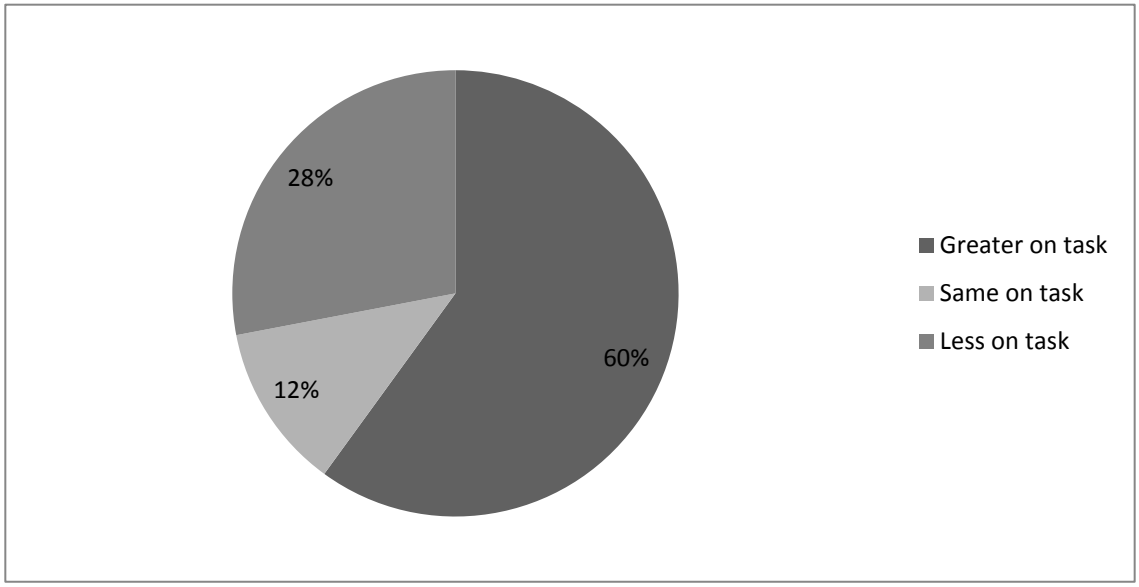


Figure 2 *Peer on task behaviors*

As seen in Figure 3, study participants displayed on task behavior at a level higher than the randomly selected peer 60% of the time. In 12% of the observations (3 observations), both study participant and the randomly selected peer displayed the same level of on task behavior during the observation. In 28% of the observations (7 observations), the randomly selected peer had a greater level of on task behavior than the study participant during the observation period. Overall, study participants demonstrated a higher level of on task behavior during the observation period than randomly selected peers in the same classroom.

Figure 3 *Participant vs. peer on task behavior*



Summary

Study participants, during observation demonstrated a higher level of on-task behavior than the randomly selected same-gender peers. Any difference in on-task behavior observed was typical behavior of the class throughout the period of classroom

observations. Study participants did not vary greatly from peers in terms of on-task behavior during the observation period.

Tier 3: Interviews of Photographs

Two themes emerged when analyzing the responses related to the photographs students took in response to the scripted prompt (Appendix D) to identify the things, places, or people that helped with school success. Themes were developed to identify the 'voice' of each interviewee through the ideas and beliefs of each participant in response to each research question. Each theme was developed in the same coding process as followed with Tier 1 with themes broadly differentiated into photographs of people and objects. The category, people, was further divided into four subcategories to include family, teacher, self, and other while the category objects was divided into two separate categories including school-related and non-school-related.

People – Family

One theme emerging from interviewing study participants about the photographs was family as helping them be successful in school. Study participants identified parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, sisters, and brothers as people helping them become successful at school. Study participants listed one or more family members in 21 of 25 instances making family the primary theme under the category people.

Study participants made comments about family members including:

"This picture is most important because my mom is always help me with my homework when I don't know what to do," said Brad.

Ursula said, “Mom – because she supports me the most she is always there when I need her and when I want something, she comes to all my awards shows, she makes sure I have all that I need and she also makes sure I have some of my wants.”

Karen stated, “My cousin, she help me cuz she go to college too and she know more things so the same with my sister is I’m stuck on a problem and I’m not home and I’m at their house she will help me.”

Additional comments about family included:

Steve commenting, “Father and brother – they help me stay focused when I’m like studying at home and they help me stay focused at school also.”

“My granddaddy and grandma – they come to the things that I do,” said Betty.

Ivan stating, “Auntie – encourage me just like my momma did, but every time I wouldn’t do my homework she would yell at me and scream at me and tell me to do my homework.”

People – Teacher

The second theme that emerged from interviewing study participants about their photographs identified teachers or a specific teacher as a person who helped them be successful at school. Reasons that were listed associated with teachers included:

Karen saying, “My teacher, because she helps me with all my subjects and she help me learn more.”

Carl stating, “It was supposed to be a picture of my teacher for her helping me so well and being successful in 5th grade.”

"My SS class – Ms. M--- is the teacher that is always telling us about colleges and how the future's gonna be because most teachers only tell us about what's in the book she tell us about the world," noted by Valerie.

Ellie said, "Ms. B---– she helps us because some of the stuff I didn't get, I actually didn't know she told us like just come to her she'll teach it to us during independent reading – she was helping out Ms. P---."

This second theme was identified one or more times by 15 of 25 study participants. Interviewees further made statements to reflect their feelings about teachers including:

Fiona said, "Ms. P--- – she she's not like a soft teacher, tough teacher you learn more."

Ann stating, "Teacher – She my teacher and I come to school everyday and she help us learn things and she help us do very good jobs on our work so we can pass to 4th grade."

People – Self

The second theme emerging from examining photographs with study participants was identifying oneself as playing a critical role in determining academic success. Seven of the 25 study participants photographed them or something to represent them when asked to photograph people, places, or things helping them to be successful in school. Participants made comments such as:

Nancy said, "Me – because I encourage myself to do better and keep myself disciplined and knowing what to do and what not to do."

Greg said, "Me, 'cuz I sometimes push myself to do better."

Steve stated, “Me and one of my little brothers – he’s kind of like something help me stay focused ‘cuz he come out and mess with me and I know I have to stay focused on what I’m doing.”

People – Other

The final theme that emerged from the people category was people other than family, teachers, or themselves. These people included family friends, school friends, and school volunteers. Overall, other people were mentioned by 8 of the 25 study participants and one particular school volunteer was mentioned by three of the study participants by name. Responses related to other people included:

“I have known her since I was like three she keeps me influenced because she like keeps me into my work,” said Nancy.

Connie stating, “My friends – like if I have a problem I go to them if I am sad or mad.”

Nancy said, “!U--- N--- – I met this one this year and they have really influenced me to do stuff because they are smart too like I am.”

“My friend – she help me, like when we be on the phone, like when we be doing homework together and Ms. G--- she don’t mind us doing it together on the phone,” said Jill.

A school volunteer was pictured and discussed by three students who identified him in the following manner:

“Mr. H----- – because when he comes he like tells us stories of like when the slavery was been there was only one classroom to be taught in and they had to walk to school,” Fiona said.

Ellie stated, “Mr. H---- – because when we were talking about Social Studies and all kinds of stuff he said he be saying encouraging stuff to be helping us.”

Brad said, “I choose this picture because he always comes and talks to us about the old days when he was little that would help us – Mr. H---.”

Summary

In all the photographs, study respondents identified a person, and in most cases many people, that helped with school success. Whether it was a family member, teacher, self, or an outside person, it was evident people, either by influence or example, were identified to have a great impact on the academic success of study participants.

Objects – School Related

One theme that emerged from interviewing study participants about the photographs they took identified school related objects in photographs when asked to “identify the things, places, or people that you think help you to be successful at school”. These objects included photographs of books, computers, the library, classrooms, hallways, school buildings and posters in the school. Study participants photographed school-related objects and discussed them in 10 of 25 instances during the Tier 3 interviews. Participants explained their choice of photographs,

“Computer. It helps me do good on projects,” said Greg.

Valerie said, “My literature book teaches me more because I am actually taking English I which is a high school credit for me so I am already getting a head start before I even get to high school.”

“Poster – on 6th grade hall, it tells you about books that’s why I took a picture of that,” said Will.

Adam said, “The Library – if I need help on a report I read a book on it.”

“Class room – it does keep us stable and stuff, keep us from running around and stuff, it just organize us,” said Todd.

Objects – Non School-Related

The second theme that emerged from the photographs identifying objects were identified to help study participants to be successful in school included objects were not directly related to school. These objects were noted by 11 of the 25 study participants and had a wide range of reasons for inclusion according to the respondents. Objects included photographs of food, doctor’s offices, a car, a church sign, the sky, a cell phone and a graduation “uniform.”

Steve identified food by the statement, “Food – I can use this to stay smart, it’s like my brain food.”

Quinn attributed his doctor by saying, “My doctor’s office --- ‘cuz it keeps me healthy so I can come to school.”

Jill identified a car by the statement, “Car -- Because I got an A/B honor roll sticker on the back of that car and it remind me of when I was on the honor roll.”

Ivan said, “My church sign – all the people in my church believe in me and say I can do anything I want to.”

Carl said his picture, “Represents that the sky’s not the limit to success.”

Nancy showed her cell phone by saying, “This is my cell phone – this is like, I got this because of my awards and stuff and I get it taken if I don’t have my grades up so I have my grades up so I can keep it.”

Diane identified a picture of a cap and gown and said, “My cousin’s graduation uniform and he was the valedictorian and he won the tiger statue thing his little thing that goes around his waist because he was the valedictorian.”

Summary

The objects identified as helping with school success in photographs included a variety of both school related and non-school related objects. Many different objects were identified, but it was clear that both internal and external factors were considered important to study participants.

Trustworthiness

Data was then analyzed using a an intensive review, coding, and categorizing of the data contained in the interview transcripts, a review of observation tally charts, and a review of photographs with the follow up interview transcripts. Common themes identified by participants were noted and compared among different responses. Collected data was reviewed throughout the data analysis period to compare participant responses and to identify commonalities among study participant responses. Analysis of data was conducted many months after data collection due to outside circumstances and the researcher viewed the responses to the interview questions without particular bias.

Trustworthiness in qualitative data is important to establish. One of the ways to establish the data and interpretation can be trusted to be accurate is by member checking. Participants in this study were asked to review a summary of their coded data to assist in determining whether anything was missed, either in the initial exchange of information or in the analysis. Participants were also asked to confirm whether the coded and categorized data represented what they were saying and feeling. However, none of the

students chose to complete this section of the study. Once the interviews were completed these students were apparently satisfied the researcher would treat their stories with care and caution and did not wish to review or participate in further parts of the study analysis (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998).

Summary

The study answered the question number 1 of how do rural low SES African American students describe why they think they are successful in academic pursuits in school? The study participants identified themes to identify academic success including hard work and studying 56% of the time when asked what things are most important to academic success. Study participants further identified people, places and things that they attributed to academic success via photographs including the broad categories of people, including family in 84% of responses, teachers in 60% of responses, and self in 28% of the responses. School related objects were also identified as important to academic success in 40% of the responses, while non-schoolrelated objects were noted 44% of the time. Overall, participants identified hard work and studying as well as family, teacher, and personal support and school and non-school related objects as main factors in identifying school success.

The study answered research question number 2 of what are the factors affecting the academic achievement of rural low SES African American students by identifying feelings about education to include identifying education as an important part of success in 52% of the responses, developing and seeking future goals in 88% of the responses when discussing the importance of education, and identifying the control over education by individual students in 88% of the responses. Overall, the respondents identified

positive feelings about their education, demonstrated strong goals for the future, and overwhelmingly identified that ultimate control of success in the academic setting came from within the individual. In addition, based on the classroom observations conducted during the study, it was apparent that the study respondents displayed on-task behavior at a rate that was not significantly different from randomly selected peers indicating that on-task behavior was not the sole indicator of academic success of the study respondents.

The study answered research question number 3 of what resources were available to rural low SES African American students to pursue their academic studies by identifying many different resources that were important to the study participants. Specific examples included a variety of resources that were attributable to academic success including the broad categories of people and objects. Within the category of people, family was noted in 84% of the photograph responses, while identifying teachers was noted in 60% of the respondents. In terms of objects, non-school related objects and resources and school related objects were noted with almost equal frequency of 44% and 40 % respectively. The result of these findings indicate that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors were considered as resources available to rural low SES African American students to pursue academic studies. Themes emerged as a result of analyzing and coding the data. The themes emerging from Tier 1 included T1Q1) education, friends, and future orientation; T1Q2) future goals, importance, learning and parents; T1Q3) most/all, choice, teacher, and some/little; and T1Q4) hard work/study, person, and reward punishment. Themes emerging through Tier 3 included two broad categories of people and objects. The people category was divided into four subcategories: family, teacher, self, and others. The objects category was divided into two subcategories: school related

and non-school related. The themes in each tier emerged independently and reflected the words and feelings of the participants. The data analysis place over several months, included changes and modifications, and involved reducing the data, codes, categories, and themes. The themes presented reflect the experiences of the participants as revealed during interviews. Data were checked many times, some of the original codes did not stand up to scrutiny across all of the participants. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore why some low SES students in a rural area were high academic achievers. High academic achievement was defined as above average performance in the classroom and on standardized measures despite having multiple risk factors for student failure. Factors included, low SES, a rural environment, and minority status. Study participants were in grades 3 – 8, between the ages of 8 and 14, and each of the students had demonstrated a high level of academic achievement. Individual student interviews (Tier 1), classroom observations (Tier 2), and photographs taken by study participants with follow up interviews (Tier 3) were used to identify factors contributing to high academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to use a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the factors participants identified as leading them to excel in school achievement. Study participants were selected based on ethnic group (African-American), low socioeconomic status; and living in a rural setting. These factors are typically associated with academic failure in traditional school settings.

There were three overarching research questions guiding the process, thinking, analysis, and interpretation of the results of this qualitative study. This phenomenological qualitative study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do rural low SES African American students describe why they think they are successful in academic pursuits in school?
2. What are the factors affecting the academic achievement of rural low SES African American students?

3. What resources were available to rural low SES African American students to pursue their academic studies?

Research question number 1 was answered as study participants identified themes of hard work and studying as well as family, teacher, and personal support and school and non-school related objects as main factors in identifying school success. In research question number 2 the respondents identified positive feelings about their education, demonstrated strong goals for the future, and overwhelmingly identified that ultimate control of success in the academic setting came from within the individual. In addition, based on the classroom observations conducted during the study, it was apparent that the study respondents displayed on-task behavior at a rate that was not significantly different from randomly selected peers indicating that on-task behavior was not the sole indicator of academic success of the study respondents. In research question number 3 participants identified specific resources including a variety of resources that were attributable to academic success including the broad categories of people and objects. Within the category of people, family, teachers, and self were noted in the photograph responses. In terms of objects, non-school related objects and resources and school related objects were noted with almost equal frequency. The result of the findings indicate that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors were considered as resources available to rural low SES African American students to pursue academic studies.

All interviews were transcribed and prepared for analysis (Riessman, 1993). No theories or assumptions were made about the data. The first step in the data analysis was to read the data repeatedly. Sticky notes and written notes were made and attached to the transcripts to inform the analysis. The data was coded and categories of grouped codes

developed. Every effort on the part of the research was made to be objective and let the stories of the African-American, low SES, academically successful student emerge from the analysis. The analysis required an interpretation of those experiences (Riessman, 1993).

Themes were identified by study participant responses to each of the four questions in Tier 1 as well as responses to the interview questions during Tier 3 of the study. In Tier 1 themes of education, friends and future orientation were identified when subjects were asked about feelings about school. Subjects identified themes of future goals, importance, learning, and parents when asked about the importance of education. When asked about how much control subjects believed they had over education subjects identified themes of most/all, choice, teacher, and some/little. Subjects identified themes of hard work/studying, person, and reward/punishment when asked about things that helped subjects earn good grades at school. In Tier 3, subjects identified pictures in two broad categories, people and objects when taking pictures of objects that they felt helped them be successful in school. Within the broad category of people, subtopics of family, teacher, self, and others were identified while the category of objects was broken down into subtopics of school-related and non-school related. Each theme along with topics supporting the themes are presented with a discussion for the findings and how each finding relates to similar responses and findings within the study and in related literature.

Discussion

Glatthorn (2005) proposed the discussion of the findings should answer the primary question, “What does your study mean?” (p. 207). In this study, the primary result was understanding how the study of high achieving, low SES, minority students, is

incomplete and only beginning to emerge. The findings from this study confirm much of what has already been reported in the literature on high achieving, low SES, minority students; however, several new ideas were identified from the data reported by the students.

When examining the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), study participants did not cite all of the six parts of the CRT model (Carter, 2008). It was interesting to note study participants only mentioned two of the six factors during the course of the individual and picture interviews. Study participants talked about a belief in self, but only a few mentioned that individual effort and self-accountability would lead to academic success. The study participants felt school was important to being able to reach their future goals, however, none of the study participants openly identified themselves as a member of a minority racial group during the interviews. Study participants did not identify or mention the other four factors cited by Carter (2008) including: achievement as a definition of self within a racial group, consciousness about racism and the challenges it may present, the value of multicultural competence as a skill for success, and developing adaptive strategies to overcome racism in the academic setting.

Although all study participants were minority, low SES, high achieving students, none of the students identified a need for a “counter-narrative” or different conduct as a result of their status. The study participants did not see high achievement as outside the norm, nor did they identify any coping mechanisms they used to change the common outcome of failure into academic success.

Although all study participants were from low SES backgrounds and African-American, it was not evident in their interview responses they exhibited the characteristics noted by Ansalone (2001) in the, "culture of poverty" theory. According to Ansalone, students of poverty do not emphasize key factors associated with academic success such as working hard or the perception academic achievement equals success in life. Study participants did believe hard work was the reason for their high academic achievement and education would be needed to reach many of the goals they aspired to in the future. Study participant responses did not support Ansalone's (2001) culture of poverty theory and the findings also rejected the idea family poverty had negative impact on school achievement (Caldas & Bankson, 1997) and children growing up in poverty generally achieve at a lower level in school regardless of racial identity (Gillborn, 2008) . All of the study participants qualified for free and reduced lunch, and also exhibited high academic achievement.

Study participants did not feel race was a factor in contributing to either their success or failure in school. Young et al. (2003) asserted, "beyond class, something racial is depressing the academic performance of these (African-American) students" (p. 111); however, the participants in this study did not refer or comment in any way on their race or racial identity during the study. They did not identify racism or concerns about racism during the interviews and thought their parents and other significant adults influenced their goal of high achievement in school. Almost without exception, study participants all had a significant adult figure as either a role model or encourager of high academic achievement. This contradicts the idea of Young, et al. (2003) who noted that parents from African-American culture often communicate a distrust of the educational

system and a pervasive doubt society will favor hard work and achievement of minority students based on the educational experiences of the parents.

Study participants overwhelmingly had positive feelings about school. Although interview responses did not always indicate every aspect of school was positive, all of the study participants agreed school was an important part of attaining their future goals. This finding supported Gerardi's (1990) work indicating the key for successful students from low SES backgrounds was a positive self-concept and positive ideas about school. Carter (2008) also asserted students needed to view achievement as a human trait rather than as something associated with a particular race or culture. Study participants did not have any concerns about racism or any negative feelings related to school or their ability to achieve within the academic system.

Study participants also thought success in school originates from within the individual as suggested by Carter (2008). Carter thought African-American students needed to view achievement as coming from within, not from outside sources. Participants frequently talked about the importance of education, the need for hard work and dedication to obtain goals, and thought the primary responsibility for achievement rested predominantly with the individual student. The choice for academic success rested within each individual and each student had to choose how to behave in school to determine academic success or failure. The students' ideas about students excelling academically and overcoming their background supported Fisher's (2005) thinking intrinsic motivation was the key to success. The students' on-task observations during the study was a choice exercised to obtain academic success according to participants as opposed the behavior of randomly selected peers who did not pay attention in class. The

choice to pay attention to “take advantage” of education was a factor in the academic success of successful students.

Study participants identified a significant role model or individual as an important part of school success. In many cases, the role model was a parent or other family member; however, at times a significant person outside of the family was identified as a role model responsible for the success of the students. The identification of a role model supported the work of Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman (2007) identifying parent involvement as more important to student achievement than any other factor. Education is not always thought to be important in the African-American culture (Lynn, 2006), but study participants felt strongly that that parent or family involvement was a key factor in their academic success.

Jacobs and Harvey (2005) found parental attitudes and expectations to have an impact on student achievement and these attitudes and expectations help in overcoming the more negative effects of low SES and minority background. Study participants repeatedly talked about the importance of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and other family in contributing to their academic success.

Study Limitations

The limitations of this study included the small nature and size of the sample, the uniqueness of the school setting selected, and the limitations of the method selected to compile data and the inability, therefore, to generalize beyond these specifics. Although this study may be replicated in other environments, there may be additional factors that impact the results outside of the scope of this particular study.

A further limitation of the study involves the cross-cultural relationship between the researchers who were Caucasian and the study participants who were of African-American heritage. The researchers had extensive experience working with students from African-American descent, however, the cultural background of the students and researcher may have affected how the questions were asked and the data interpreted despite efforts to reduce bias.

An additional limitation of this study was the inability to assess whether or not there was any one singular theme contributing to the academic success of low income, minority students. The small number of participants and the unique setting of the study limited the study. While qualitative studies are more in depth, it would be inappropriate to try to generalize the findings of the study beyond this one school district. If the study were replicated in similar setting with similar students, the findings might be different or similar.

An additional limitation is the cognitive development of typically developing children between the ages of 8 and 14. Children in this age group psychologically have limited abstract thinking processes. This is a normal developmental limitation, not attributed to any particular socio-economic group. Therefore, in some of the theories related to Critical Race Theory, the study participants may not have the cognitive capacity to verbalize themes and concepts related to those theories until a later age.

Based on the scope of the study, the participants had to meet specific criteria to participate in the study. All participants were required to have African-American heritage, low SES backgrounds, resided in a rural setting in a specific school district at the time of the study, and exhibited high academic achievement based on MAP testing

within the school district. As a result, the sample was limited and did not include students from all background and experiences.

Implications for Practice

Although the study participants do not have a "magic bullet" for guaranteeing school success, several common factors emerged from the study. The themes identified by the analysis included: valuing the importance of education to reaching future goals, a significant supportive adult to encourage academic success, believing the individual is in control of success or failure in an academic setting, and believing hard work will pay off in terms of high academic achievement. If schools and parents could focus on these key elements with high risk children, the impact on schools and traditionally struggling students might be significant.

In an effort to value the importance of education to reaching future goals schools and parents should promote the value of education from an early age, even during the preschool years. In the current and future age, it is imperative for students to develop the value of education thorough both formal and informal programming within the home and the school so that as they progress through the grades, students will work to achieve in the academic setting. A major factor that set study participants apart from less successful peers, was the belief that education was important to reaching future goals and that hard work was an integral part of achieving that success. Programming to instill this value would be invaluable to improving the future of students in the United States, especially in communities where education is not valued or identified as an important priority.

Another factor imperative for inclusion in programming either at home or within the education system is a significant supportive adult to encourage academic success.

Study participants indicated the support of a significant adult as important in academic achievement. In many rural and low SES, minority areas, significant educated adult role models are often in short supply. Schools with high risk students, are encouraged to develop mentoring programs beginning at an early age to provide a supportive adult to assist these students in overcoming many of the barriers that exist to academic success without the assistance of a mentor.

An additional factor that was determined to be imperative to academic success in study participants was developing the belief that the individual is in control of success or failure in an academic setting. Again parent programming as well as programming developed within the school system can assist with providing this belief of intrinsic motivation in students. A program beginning in Kindergarten and continuing through elementary school can be developed and implemented with struggling students and high risk students to make an effort to supplement beliefs that may be lacking within either the home or the community based on the school experiences of the parents and community members.

Finally the belief that hard work will pay off in terms of high academic achievement needs to be instilled in high risk students. A school program coupled with a parenting program to instill the belief that hard work will pay off in terms of high academic achievement should be developed to directly teach students the vital importance of working hard to achieve academic success. In addition, schools should examine the accuracy, validity, and relevance of grading practices so that students receive fair, unbiased and useful grades within the school system. The antiquated grading system

of grading for punishment rather than grading to gauge leaning needs to be examined by schools and improved to better serve student and accurately assess student achievement.

During this age of accountability for a failing American education system, the results of this study provide an important view of student achievement from the eyes of the individual students. Study participants did not identify failing school systems or poor teachers, but identified factors that must be developed intrinsically within a child to support and maintain high academic achievement. These successful students cited parents, significant adults, and communities as having a significant impact on improving school achievement, regardless of the educational or economic circumstances of the individual student. Legislators, educators, and communities need to look beyond casting blame to develop programs and support for students.

Emphasis on the factors identified by the study may provide traditionally failing students with the tools to overcome the barriers in their lives to academic achievement. Beginning in preschool, it would be important to emphasize the value of education, help parents become supporters of their children, encourage students to develop an internal locus of control for school success, and stress how hard work reaps positive results. This would provide struggling students with some of the intangible factors study participants noted as keys to academic success. The responses by study participants supported Berzin (2010); that merely focusing on academic achievement will continue to fail students from low SES, minority backgrounds. Programming must also include social supports in order to impact any lasting change in student achievement.

Recommendations for Future Research

The first recommendation for future research would be to replicate the study in a different setting with a different group of students or using an older age group such as 16-18 year olds. An older age group of students with more developed cognitive skills may enable future research to examine the abstract themes relative to CRT. In addition, expanding the study to multiple school districts with more students might produce different results. Changes in the setting of the study, the demographics of the school district, the racial make up of the school districts, and the area of the country would lend itself to an interesting comparison of minority, low SES, high achieving students having similar views and experiences across venues. This study was conducted in a primarily African-American school district and studying African-American low achieving students in a district where there were few African-Americans might produce different results. Finally, including a family educational level component or interviewing parents in addition to students would provide an additional perspective on the success of some low-income minority students. Jacobs and Harvey (2005) indicated the academic background of the parents has a significant impact on the message conveyed to the children and might help in clarifying the difference in study participants from other peers.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore why some low-income minority students were academically successful in school. Twenty-five students in grades 3-8 meeting the criteria of African-American, low SES, and high achieving were selected and interviewed to identify factors contributing to their academic success. The study participant responses were compared and discussed through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT),

however, the data did not support the tenets of CRT as there was little discussion of race or racism during the study. However, it is not clear whether the cognitive development of the study participants may have impacted this finding. Through the three-tier process of interviews, observations, and photographs with interviews, themes were developed supporting academic success. Themes included positive feelings about school, internal locus of control, and having a significant role model. The findings indicated that the majority of the students attributed these themes to their success in school. Recommendations for future research were made and implications for practice were discussed. Overall, study participants were an exceptional group of students, overcame many barriers to success, and became successful learners.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Liberty University Institutional Review Board Approval

IRB Approval 711.051109: Academic Success Factors for African-American Students from Rural, Poverty Backgrounds
Institution Review Board
Sent: Sunday, September 20, 2009 11:12 PM
To: Cooler, Meredith B; Jones, Jill Anne; Garzon, Fernando L.
Cc: Institution Review Board

Dear Meredith,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. Attached you'll find the forms for those cases.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project. We will be glad to send you a written memo from the Liberty IRB, as needed, upon request.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
IRB Chair, Liberty University
Center for Counseling and Family Studies Liberty University
1971 University Boulevard
Lynchburg, VA 24502-2269
(434) 592-4054
Fax: (434) 522-0477

Appendix B : Consent Form

Identification of Factors for African-American Students from Rural, Poverty Backgrounds Who Demonstrate Academic Success

Meredith Cooler

Liberty University

Graduate Education

You are invited to be in a research study to help determine factors that have contributed to your child being successful in school. You were selected as a possible participant because your child lives in a rural, high-poverty area, but shows high academic achievement. We ask that you read this form and ask questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Meredith Cooler, Liberty University

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors students from African-American heritage and low socioeconomic backgrounds attribute to being responsible for academic success.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, we may ask you to do the following things:

Answer questions in an audio taped interview, ask parent to participate in audio taped interview, and also audio tape an interview regarding your child with the child's school administrator.

Risks and Benefits

The study has no more risk than the participant would encounter in everyday life.

The benefits to participation are to gain a greater understanding of the factors that make the child successful in school.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be sorted securely and only researchers will have access to the records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions

The research conducting this study is Meredith Cooler. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact the researcher at Allendale County Schools District Office (803) 584-4603, mbcooler@liberty.edu. Or the advisor, Dr. Jill A. Jones, (434) 592-4903, jajones9@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 2400, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.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 asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participation in the study.

Signature:_____Date:_____

Signature of Parent:_____Date:_____

Signature of Researcher:_____Date:_____

Appendix C: Student Discussion Topics

How do you feel about school?

How important is your education to you?

How much control do you believe you have over your education?

What things do you feel are most important in you getting good grades at school?

Appendix D: Scripted Explanation for Disposable Cameras

Think about why you are successful at school. (pause) Use this disposable camera to take pictures of the things, places, or people that you think help you to be successful at school. Be prepared to share your reasons with me when we talk after the pictures are developed. I will come back to collect the camera from you in five days so all of your pictures will need to be on the camera by that time. You will need to take at least 12 pictures, but you may use all of the film in the camera if you wish. Do you have any questions about what I am asking you to do?

(Briefly explain operation of cameras to students.)

Appendix E: Questions for Pictures

1. Why did you select this subject for your picture?

2. How did the subject of this picture help you to do well in school?

Appendix F: Observation Procedures

The classroom observation will examine on-task/off-task behavior of target student and one similar researcher-selected peer in either a Math or an English/Language Arts class for each target student in the sample.

On Task Behavior is defined as: the student is looking at or toward the educational stimuli. Examples include looking at a workbook/textbook, looking at the teacher during instruction, looking at a classmate during group discussion, completing an independent assignment. The on-task behavior sample is a moment in time where the observer records the behavior at a specified point in time. Each box on the chart represents a one-second interval. The observer looks at the target the first second of his thirty-second observation interval and tallies a mark if the student is on task. At the onset of the second thirty-second interval, the observer looks at the random peer and tallies a mark if the peer is on-task. At the onset of the next thirty-second interval, the observer looks at the target student again and repeats this cycle for the entire fifteen minute observation.

Class: **Target #:**

Time	Target Student		Time	Peer	
Onset			30 seconds		
1 minute			1:30		
2:00			2:30		
3:00			3:30		
4:00			4:30		
5:00			5:30		
6:00			6:30		
7:00			7:30		
8:00			8:30		
9:00			9:30		
10:00			10:30		
11:00			11:30		
12:00			12:30		
13:00			13:30		
14:00			14:30		
15:00			15:30		
Totals	+	/	Totals	+	/
Percentage			Percentage		

+ = On-task behavior / = Off-task behavior

Scoring

1. Upon completion of the observation, total the on-task/off-task (plus and slash) marks for both the peer and the target student in the box on the bottom of the form.
2. Divide the total on-task tallies (+) by 15 and multiply by 100, do the same with the total off-task tallies (/). The result is the percent of on-task or off-task behavior. This is calculated for both the target student and the random peer.

Appendix G: Code Definitions

Tier 1 Question 1 How do you feel about school?

Learn/education: references learning or education

Friends: references actions of peers, others, friends, students, siblings

Future Orientation: references future, goals, jobs, growing up, college

Tier 1 Question 2 How important is your education to you?

Future Goals: references to career choices, jobs, degrees, college, growing up

Importance: references important or importance of education

Learning: references to learning, education

Parents: references parent, family

Tier 1 Question 3 How much control do you believe you have over your education?

Most/all: references 90-100%, lots, all

Choice: references choice, trying, self-determination, control over behavior

Teacher: references teacher determining outcome

Some/little: references none or small amount of control

Tier 1 Question 4 What things do you feel are most important in you getting good grades at school?

Hard work/study: references working hard, studying, or skills related to hard work

Person: references a person, parent, teacher, or other person

Reward/punishment: references a reward or punishment

Picture Interviews

Broad Category: Person

Subcategory: Family – references any family member

Teacher – reference to a teacher

Self – references self

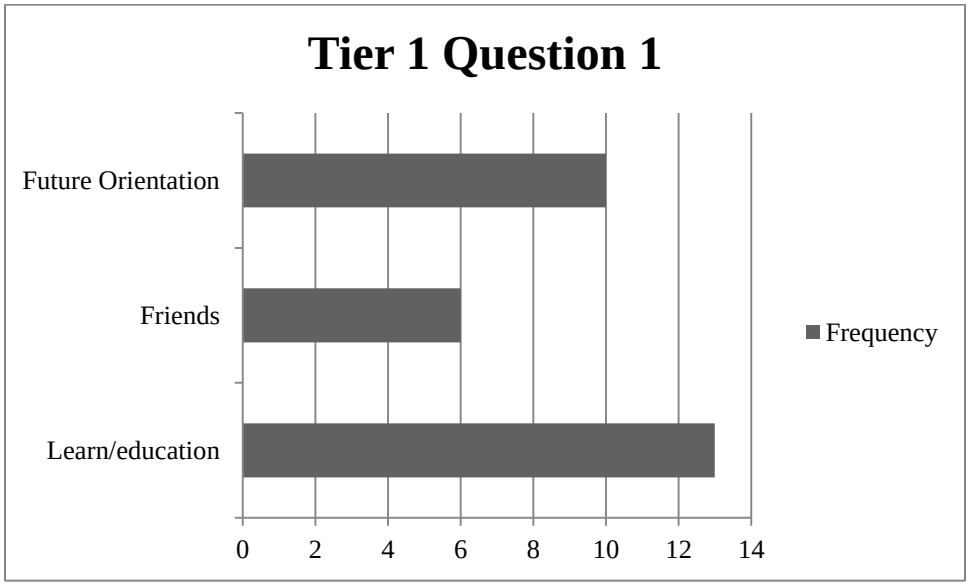
Other – references other person

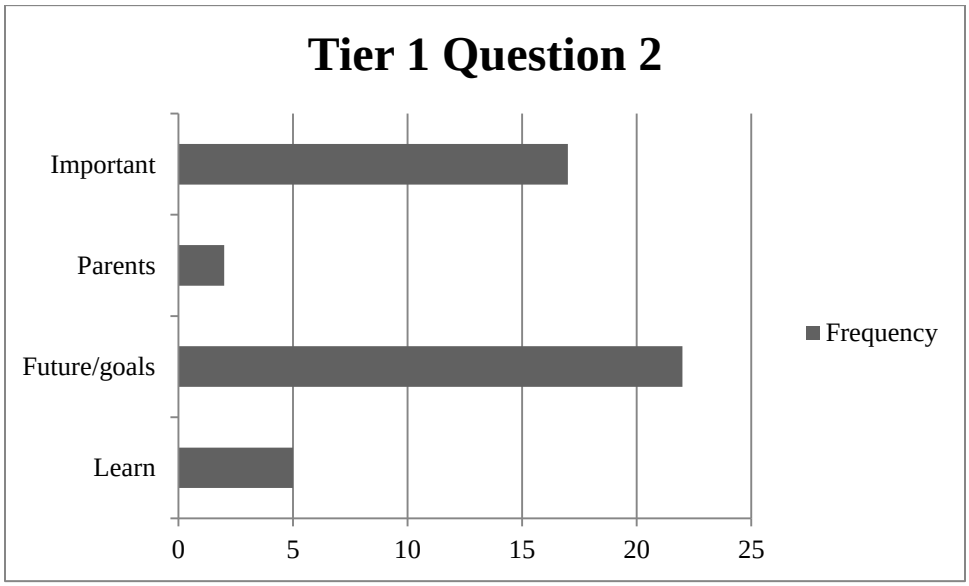
Broad Category: Object

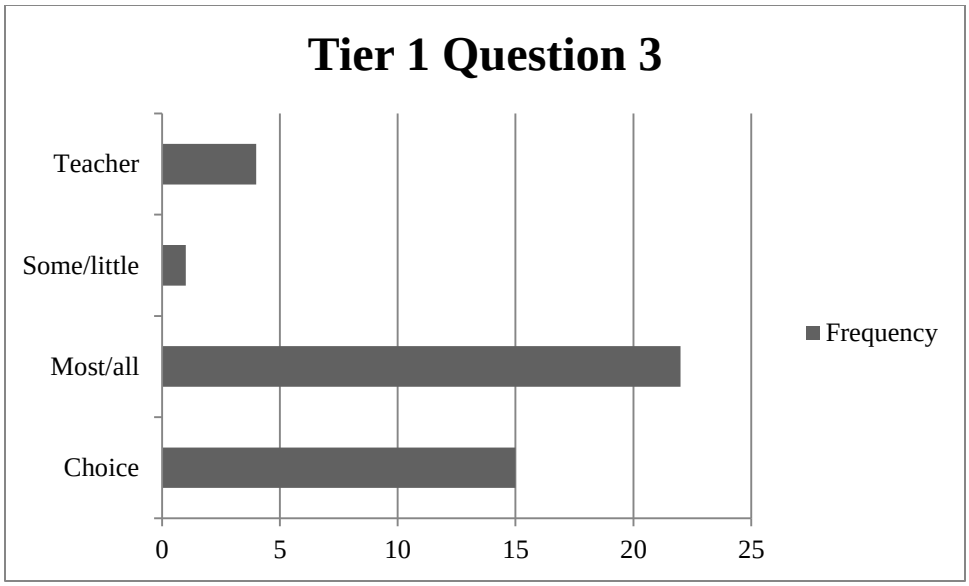
Subcategory: School related – references any objects associated with school

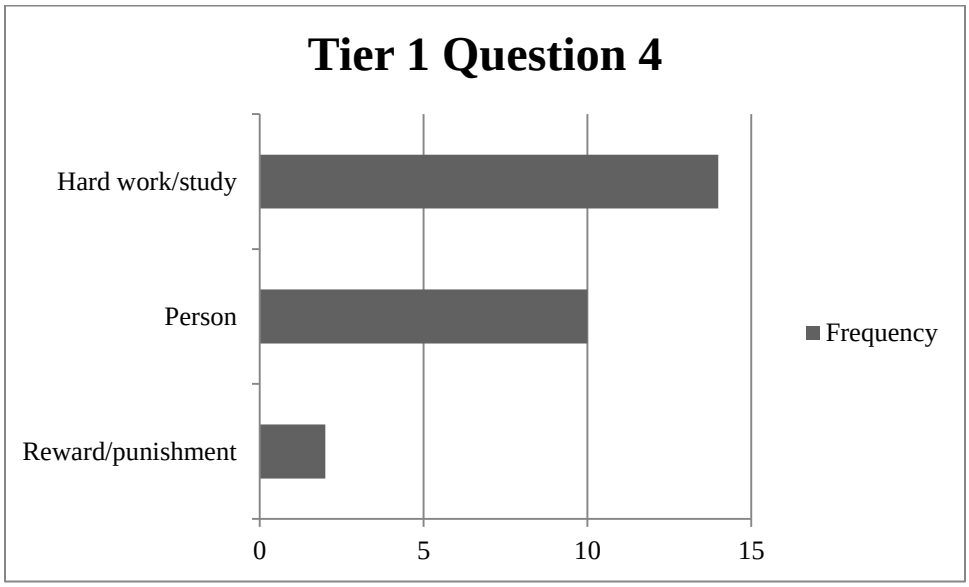
Non-school related – objects not associated with school

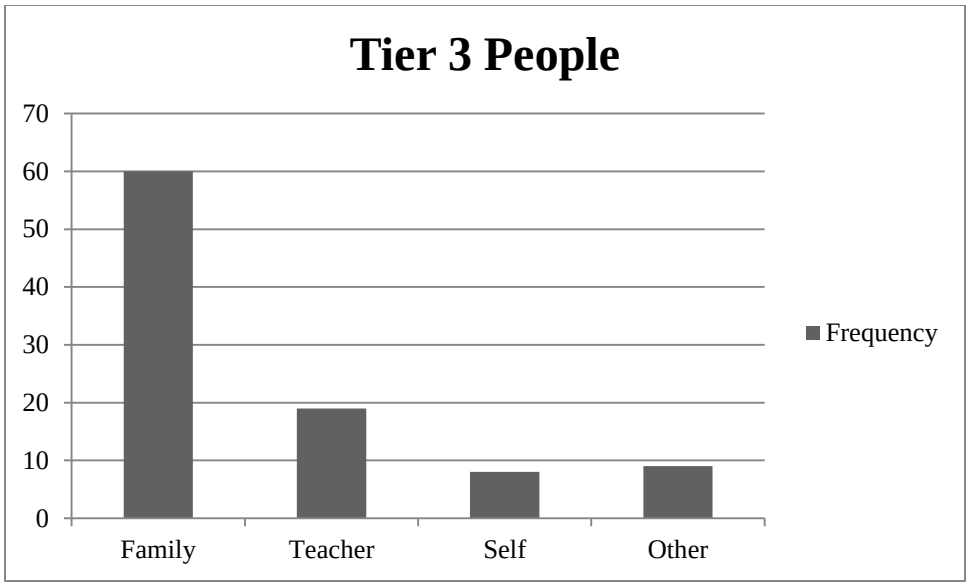
Appendix H: Coding Frequency Graphs

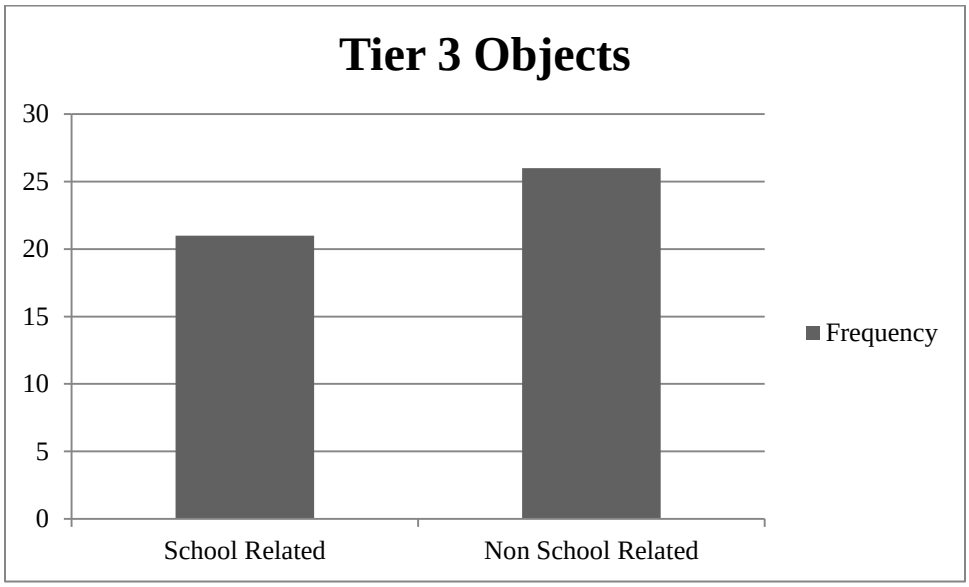





Tier 1 Question 3
Teacher
Some/little
Most/all
Choice
0
5
10
15
20
25
Frequency


Tier 1 Question 4
Hard work/study
Person
Reward/punishment
0
5
10
15
Frequency


Tier 3 People
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Family
Teacher
Self
Other
Frequency


Tier 3 Objects
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
School Related
Non School Related
Frequency

Appendix I: Audit Trail

Provided below is a time line which summarizes the dates in which different timeframes in which the study and data collection were completed.

January 2009 - Research Proposal Submitted to Dissertation Committee

March 2009 - Phone Conference with Committee Approving Proposal

April 2009 - IRB Application Submitted for Review & Approval

September 2009 - IRB Application Approved

December 2009 - Research Consent forms Distributed to student body

January 2010 - All Research Consent forms collected and filed for study

March/April 2010 - Individual Student Interviews Conducted (Tier I)

April/May 2010 - Student Classroom Observations Conducted (Tier II)

April/May 2010 - Follow-up Interviews with Photographs Conducted (Tier III)

August 2010 – July 2011 – Chapter Edits and Revisions

- August 2010 – Dissertation Committee change
- January 2011 – Dissertation Committee change
- June 2011 – Full Dissertation Committee re-established
- June 2011 – Research consultant assigned

July/August 2011- Revisions for Research consultant

September – November 2011 – Research Consultant Approval

December – February 2012 – Analysis of Data

March – April 2012 – Discussion of Data

April/May 2012 – Final Approval from Committee and Research Consultant

July 2012 – Successful Defense of Dissertation